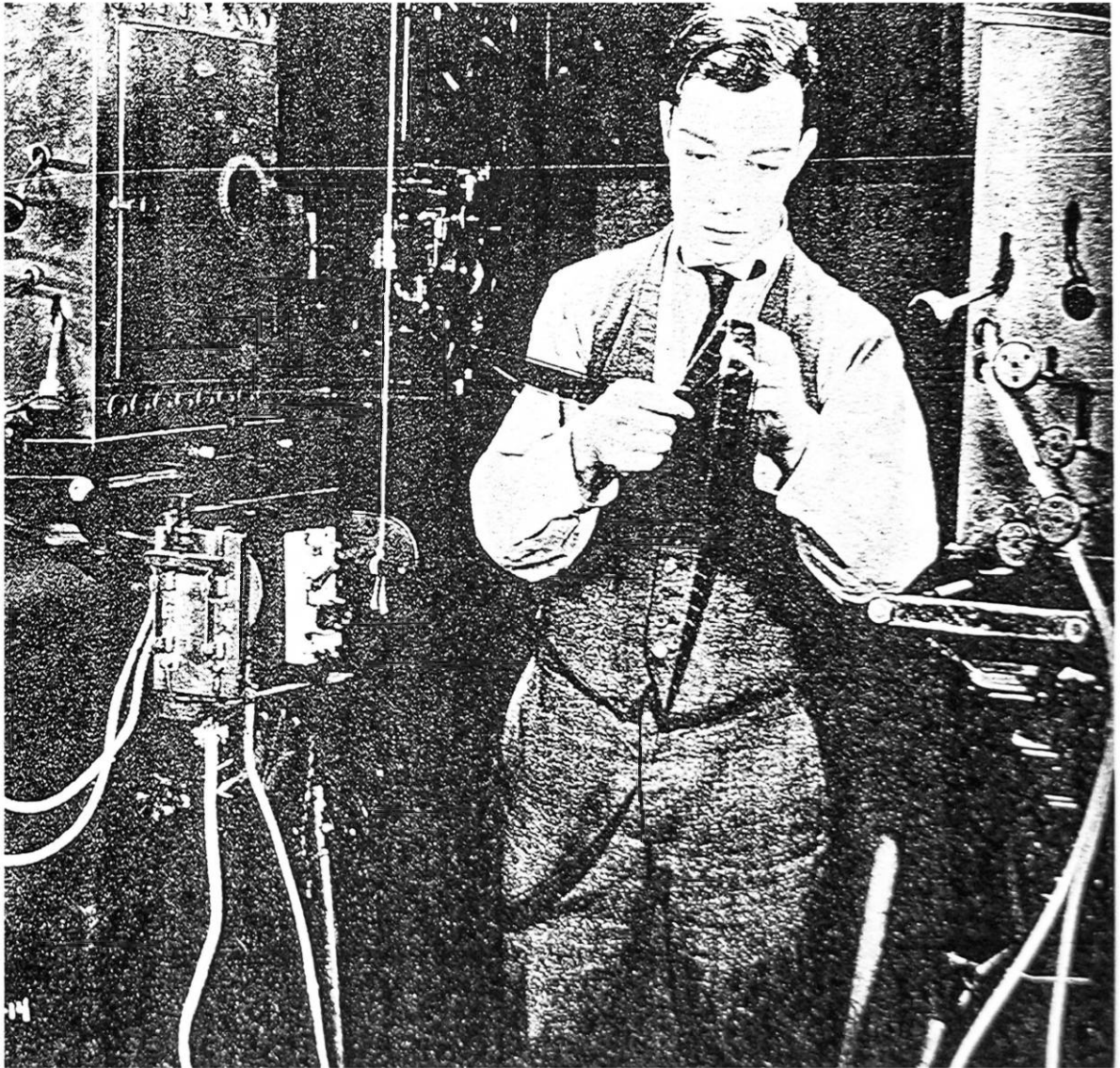


BUSTER KEATON



THE LITTLE IRON MAN

BUSTER KEATON



THE LITTLE IRON MAN

BUSTER KEATON, THE LITTLE IRON MAN.

[The chronologically arranged collected quotations of Buster Keaton, interspersed with quotations from other eye witnesses, notably Eleanor Keaton.]

Edited by Oliver Lindsey Scott.

WARNING, CONTAINS SOME ADULT LANGUAGE:

Buster did a lot of cussing, but never what I would call really dirty, there was no dirty words, no four-letter words, anything like that, *ever!* And he never talked dirty about anything or anybody. No bath-room humor, no sex humor, nothing like that, *ever!* Eleanor Keaton. 1993.

Reason this book is necessary...

What it all comes down to is that except for a four or five year period in the early 1930's, Buster was a very fulfilled happy man all his life. But when you read different things by different people he dissolves into a sad, unhappy, poor lump of nothing. Eleanor Keaton. 1993.

[In other words, no biography has yet dealt with Buster Keaton the human being, as opposed to Buster Keaton the human mop. This book is designed to be a foil against which any other works on Buster may be checked, and also as a true first reader for those who have never read a book about Buster Keaton before. This book is dedicated to: Anybody else that cares about the truth, wherever you're hiding.]

FOREWORD.

For 24 years I have described myself as the 'World's biggest Buster Keaton Fan.' Nothing I have seen or learnt since inclines me to change my opinion that Buster Keaton is quite simply the finest stuntman in the history of film, and also a fine actor, film-maker, special effects creator, story and script writer, and so on. In other words, Buster Keaton is the finest all-round film performer and creator that we have yet seen, and that further, the uniqueness of his opportunity to create means that the chances of such another ever being allowed the same freedom are extremely slim, and therefore he is almost certainly the finest we ever will see. I would have preferred to see all the films again, often, but my choice was limited to reading books about him. This is the book I was looking for when first I went looking. Though it is intended to be both a life story and a technical work, it would be best to read it as a companion volume to the films Buster created.

THIS IS A HISTORICAL COMPILATION FROM ALMOST ENTIRELY ORAL SOURCES. AS A RESULT IT CANNOT BE WRITTEN OR CONSTRUCTED LIKE A WORK OF FICTION.

As far as I am aware this is the first time a biography has been constructed in this way, so I hope you will bear with me.¹

This book contains every reliably recorded word Buster spoke, and the liberties I have taken have in fact been very few indeed, very minor indeed, and are fully authorized by Eleanor Keaton.

¹[If you wish to understand fully *why* this book was necessary, and why it was necessary to set it out this way, turn to page 436 and read about the method of collection and the sources of the quotations used.]

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The end result is a fully detailed biography cum autobiography, with Buster telling his own life story; and others interjecting with questions, or stories, and occasionally opinions, at the relevant moment. Almost no narrative or opinions have been added by the editor. Americans may find some of the footnotes unnecessary, but I believe most other English speakers will feel otherwise.² So, sit back, relax, and prepare to savour a privileged guided tour through the entertainment and performance arts of this century, from the Medicine Shows to the Beatles, and every word from the horse's mouth.

[Those few readers who like to read an introduction, turn to page 466.]



Buster Keaton with wife Eleanor at 1962 Berlin Film Festival.

Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely intentional. The characters and situations in this work are wholly non-fictional and unimaginary, and portray, and are intended to portray actual persons and parties.

²[Where a footnote is marked K.H. it was kindly supplied by Ken Harris of the Department of American Studies at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. When Marked K.H.M.M. his source was Mathews Mitford. A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles. 2 Vols Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.]

LIST OF TYPEFACES.

Buster Keaton. Quotes displayed in Times New Roman.

[As Buster is the meat of the book, "" marks are dispensed with throughout, also for Eleanor, suffice it to say it is all originally from oral sources. Where Buster recounts another persons speech, it is still displayed in

Times New Roman.

Where other people with acceptable recall recount Buster's speech, **Times New Roman is used.**

Buster is the only person given margins.

WARNING. The resulting text of Buster speaking *cannot* be treated as a direct quotation if removed from the text. The point of the exercise is to display everything he said in chronological order, and this means the result is not what he actually said at any given moment, but a collection of everything he said *about* any given moment.]

Eleanor Norris Keaton. Buster's third wife [his longest marriage], from 1940 until his death. Quotes displayed in Times New Roman 12 Bold.

[Where Eleanor recounts Buster's speech,

Times New Roman 12 Bold is still used.

Eleanor is the only person allowed to interrupt Buster without waiting for a paragraph.

If there is no gap between Eleanor and the quote above, she is answering it.

A week was spent interviewing Mrs. Keaton, in 1993. Her comments enter often, because Buster was very polite, and very reticent about saying anything that might reflect adversely on anyone else, or because Buster was simply never asked the relevant question.]

Myra Keaton. Quotes displayed in Arial Bold. 11. Buster's Mother.

Joe Keaton. Quotes Displayed in Arial 12. Buster's Father.

Others; [many and various.] Quotes displayed in Courier New 11.

[Method of choice among others:-

A.) They have information Buster didn't say or didn't know, and

B.) They were as close to the horse's mouth, as honest, as observant, or as impartial as I could find.

The main problem in filling the gaps in Buster's relation of his life, after the addition of Eleanor's knowledge, was which quotes to exclude. Either the book became unwieldy, or quotes that covered the most ground in the shortest period had to be the order of the day. I hope I have included enough without including too much or too little.]

[] [Editorial additions. Only the editor uses square brackets.]

" " are used for "speech,"

and where anyone recounts anyone's speech,

"A new line is started." All speech is punctuated inside the " " regardless of the punctuation of the sentence that contains it.

' ' are used for 'writing;'

and 'things I'm fairly sure are written'

also for 'names of shows, songs, titles, etc.'

and 'those odd ones that mean people don't really mean quite what the words say,'

And for 'things people might, could or would have said.'

Buster names his own shows or shows he performed in without '', so does Eleanor.

American Spelling has been attempted throughout where relevant.

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"I work more than Doris Day."

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The End.

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'PANTOMIME,n. A play in which the story is told without violence to the language. The Least disagreeable form of dramatic action.'
Ambrose Bierce.

Luis Bunuel: (1927, Review of: Battling Butler. Written and directed by Buster Keaton.)

'Here is a great specialist in treating the disease called sentiment. ...the face of Buster Keaton can express infinite points of view. There is much talk about technique in films....here technique is so indissolubly fused with all the other elements that people are not even aware of it. ...the films of Keaton can enlighten reality itself...'

Marian Mack [Heroine of 'The General']: "He wasn't easy to know very closely. At first I felt a little bit, I'd say, ignored or slighted, but then he got a bit more friendly as he lost some of his shyness, and he turned out to be a very nice warm person. And a very humble one too, that's the surprising part."

He was very shy, and he just could not stand crowds. He would absolutely panic if he saw crowds coming at him.

Buster definitely was not a liar.

His favorite word in the whole world, and it used to just break me up, tickle me, was Theadical. It's a made up word and it's wonderful. He felt he was saying theatrical. In his head he said theatrical but it came out theadical. He just mispronounced it. It's like my mother's favorite word that I always loved was marvyelous, she put a whole extra syllable in the middle. And they never know they're doing it, and they're always doing it.

Jacques Tati: "Making people laugh is a wonderful profession."

Bette Midler: "Bleep them if they can't take a joke."



CHAPTER ONE.

"You'll need that gun more than I do..."

1867>1895. Joe Keaton. Myra Cutler. 10 cent shows.

1865. End of American Civil War.

1874. Barbed wire patented.

1876. Custer's last stand.

1886. Last Apache uprising under Geronimo.

1890. Wounded Knee, the massacre that ended the Indian Wars.

1907. Indian Territory becomes Oklahoma.

Joseph Hallie Keaton. Born 1867 in Indiana on a bend of the Eel River in a settlement called Dogwalk, about fifteen miles from the city of Terre Haute. Son of a gristmill owner.

My story is also a story of my father, Joe Keaton. Father is of Irish and Scotch ³ descent, and spent his boyhood in Indiana. Pop was named Joseph after his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Like each of them he was the first son of a first son. But the three earlier Joe Keatons were honest, hard-working Mid-western farmers and millers. Pop's personality was so unusual even as a boy that before he was twelve my grandfather gave up all hope of starting a flour-mill dynasty. By that time Pop had run away from school to become a bootblack and poolroom habitue in the downtown section of Terre Haute. My father got so many black eyes fighting the bigger boy bootblacks for the best street corners that he was soon nicknamed 'Dick Deadeyes'.

When he got too big to shine shoes for a living Pop returned to the family mill- but not to work. He spent most of his time entertaining the hired help and the farmers who were waiting for their corn to be ground. His repertory included songs, witty sayings, making funny faces and doing flip-flaps, as back somersaults were then called.

Grandpa Keaton was amused, but not enough.

Pop was just over voting age in 1889 when Oklahoma Bill, a promoter with a long beard and a longer imagination, came to Terre Haute and told of the great fortunes homesteaders could make in that new territory. His listeners ought to get some money together, he said. If they followed him he would show them how to conquer the elements, outwit any shifty characters who tried to rob them, and help them cope with various other problems the hardiest of pioneers had to face.

My father was intrigued, and Grandpa Keaton didn't have to be coaxed very much before he agreed to back the plan. He gave Pop one hundred dollars in cash and handed over his trusty Winchester rifle.

"If Oklahoma Bill is what I think he is," he told Pop, "you'll need that gun more than I do around here in Terre Haute."

['Go West, young man.' Often credited to Horace Greeley (1811-72) who popularized it, but the originator was John Barsone Lane Soule (1815-91) who used it in 1851 in an article published in the 'Express' at Terre Haute, Indiana.]

Despite Grandpa Keaton's skepticism, Pop did obtain possession of a quarter-section of virgin land and managed to hold onto it long enough to sell it for a thousand dollars. "I used this money to get to California," he said, "with the intention of joining some show. But no one appreciated my talent. There was talk in the air about a gold strike, but like a lot of other people I got there too late. Time passed, and so did my money.

³[With apologies to Scottish people everywhere, but Scotch appears to be normal American usage.]

When It was almost all gone I headed back to Oklahoma where the Cherokee Strip was being opened up."

Pop made the last lap of this trip straddling the top of a wood-burning locomotive, clinging for safety to the smokestack. The train stopped every time the locomotive ran out of wood. Pop and the other passengers had to get off and gather up more fuel before they could proceed. When he finally approached his destination he had only Grandpa's trusty Winchester and eight dollars in cash. Knowing from his previous experience as a pioneer what slippery customers and greedy varmints he was likely to encounter, he spent seven of the eight dollars on bullets for his rifle, using the remaining dollar for bacon and beans.

When the Cherokee Strip was opened for settlement along about 1891, Dad toed the mark with thousands of others and then ran into the Cherokee country and staked out a claim. Though they were charging a dollar a quart for water on the Strip, and everything else was expensive, Pop managed to survive and hold onto some of the land the generous Government had allotted him.

Then it was a year later that his destiny, disguised as the Cutler-Bryant 10-cent Medicine Show, caught up with him. He met my mother, Myra Cutler. She was a performer with her father's traveling tent show.

Pop, who was twenty-six, took one look at Mom, then sixteen, and smitten, applied for a job. He gave up his land, joined the Cutler show, and became a knockabout comedian.

Myra Edith Cutler, born 1877 in Modale, Iowa, a village near the Missouri River boundary line between Iowa and Nebraska.

Myra Cutler, who is of English and German parentage, was four feet eleven inches tall and weighed ninety pounds. She was born into show business, being the daughter of F. L. Cutler, one of the owners of the Cutler-Bryant travelling tent outfit. Her father, Frank Cutler, was a typical traveling showman who worked the small towns in the Midwest. I don't think he ever saw Chicago, to say nothing of New York. He came originally from Council Bluffs, Iowa. He wrote, produced, managed, and emceed the traveling medicine shows. Grandpa Cutler liked to write verses, and later on, one-act plays. The verses concerned everything from politics to the Sullivan-Corbett fight at New Orleans. When he could afford it, Grandpa Cutler had his verses printed and wrapped them around the Kickapoo Elixir which for some years had been the show's only source of revenue.⁴ He and his partner, Mr. Bryant, started charging ten-cents admission on discovering that even the small-town hicks of the Middle West didn't believe that entertainment was any good when you got it free.

Before my mother was eleven she could play the bull fiddle,⁵ the piano, and the cornet. But Mom could take show business or leave it alone. Due to travelling with her father's carnival-on-wheels as a girl, then later as Pop's partner in their vaudeville act, she never learned to cook until she was almost thirty years old. Then she did all right by us in the kitchen. Later on, she became the first woman in the United States to play a saxophone.

But all of her life Mom preferred playing auction pinochle to any other occupation, sport, amusement, employment, or, as we say in show business, divertissement.

⁴ Kickapoo elixir was a cure for everything in the world.

⁵[Double Bass.]



Buster Keaton at one year of age.

Buster's sister Louise insists that all the Keatons resemble indians. "Just look at those cheekbones! Those eyes!" Louise Keaton.

I understand Myra did have some Indian blood in the background, but I don't know how much, if any.

Pop once wrote a letter to his home-town paper in Terre Haute describing his entry into show business together with his and my mother's romance.

'I could talk show shop,' the letter explains, 'even if I couldn't do much on the stage except for my few flip-flaps. However, I was hired at three dollars a week, plus board and transportation. Nobody mentioned it, but I soon found out I was supposed to be a general utility man, which meant I was expected to do everything else, including driving in stakes with a mallet, distributing the handbills, posting up two-sheets and four-sheets, and to come in with fists flying at the cry of "Hey, Rube!" the carnival man's call for help when the local yokels become resentful at being bilked and try to take it out on the troupe. Being a sort of forgetful chap at the time, and in love besides, I often used my mallet to drive away the indignant customers.

While developing into a good rough-and-tumble fighter, I was also learning to augment my few flip-flaps with a blackface monolog, songs, and real good eccentric dancing. I called it eccentric because neither the audience nor Myra, who was accompanying me on the piano, ever knew which way my feet were going next. Neither did I, because I never made up my mind about that until the last possible moment.

Now Mr. Cutler never denied I was earning my three dollars plus board, lodging, and transportation. But he didn't like me paying attentions to his daughter. He may have been holding out for a son-in-law with an earning capacity of at least five dollars a week. At any rate, he kept firing me every time he saw us holding hands. Myra and I exchanged more tearful good-bys than a dozen Romeo and Juliet teams. But I had an ace in the hole: my minute wages. Search as he would, Mr. Cutler never could find anyone love-smitten or stupid enough to work as hard as I did for such small wages. So he also kept re-hiring me.'

<1894.>

'One day, when the Cutler-Bryant 10-cent Show was playing Lincoln, Nebraska, Myra and I slipped off to the home of a Justice of the Peace to get married. He knew his lines perfectly. But a crisis developed after he had united us in holy matrimony. He told me,

"That will be \$2, sir."

After I looked in all my pockets I could produce only \$1.90. Myra, being only seventeen and the impractical type, had nothing to contribute except a bewildered smile.

While I was squirming and sweating, the Justice of the Peace said with a grin, "Okay, Joe, I'll split the \$1.90 with you."

On the ninety-five cents I gave him he bought a big wedding breakfast, ham and eggs, rolls and coffee, for the three of us.'

After the wedding Joe took her away from my grandfather's show and my parents went to work for a medicine show at seventeen dollars a week.

Again Pop had to drive in stakes, put up the tent, pass handbills and post up two-sheets and four-sheets. They put on three acts - his song, dance, and flip-flap speciality, Mom's saxophone solos, then both of them together, Mom at the piano and Pop doing

more songs, dances and flip-flaps. Many a time, Pop said, he had to take a club along to collect their seventeen dollars.

After a few months of this, Pop and Harry Houdini, the handcuff King (who was also just making his start in show business), became partners and organized the Houdini and Keaton medicine show.

Houdini was the outside attraction, for even in those days he was a handcuff locksmith, and astonished the customers by getting out of the local sheriff's handcuffs with the greatest of ease. Houdini also did a few card tricks, and his famous needle trick, the stunt of putting a dozen needles in his mouth, then a piece of thread, chewing them, and bringing them out threaded. I've seen him do it hundreds of times, but never solved the trick.

Inside the tent where the medicine was sold, Pop did his tumbling, dances and flip-flaps, and Mom played her saxophone solos, and was a singer and a dancer in the show.

Houdini was also the 'doctor,' or butcher boy, as he is known in the business, who walked through the audience selling bottles of Kickapoo Elixir for a dollar a bottle, or six for five dollars. I suppose the recipe was obtained from the Indians; they always were. It was good, to hear Dr. Houdini tell it, for everything from the barber's itch to galloping consumption, and guaranteed to be good for any kind of rheumatism. To prove it, he had a Kickapoo squaw on one side of him, a Kickapoo brave on the other. They grunted approvingly and nodded whenever he asked them to confirm his statement that the secret prescription for this marvelous medicine had been passed down to them by their ancestors. But it was an honest entertainment, and selling medicine was no more than an additional way of making money. When the demand for medicine was dull, the butcher boy sold pop corn, peanuts and candy.

Years later in her memoirs, Mrs. Houdini told how indignant Pop became when the magician laughed uproariously at his antics while they were on the stage together, spoiling the joke. Needless to say, he was not then the great magician, illusionist and collector of souvenirs and books of the theater that he became later.

Myra Keaton: " only the tents rode-we walked"

Medicine show, 1894. Left to right: The "Doctor," Myra, Joe, Bessie Houdini, and Harry Houdini; foreground: two Caughnawaga Indians.



CHAPTER TWO.

"It was almost an accident that I ever got born".
1895>8. The Three Keatons. My Face.

About two months before I was born my mother was in an accident.

Myra Keaton: "We were appearing in Perry, Oklahoma. That's where Joes's folks' farm was - his homestead claim that he gave them when he went with my father's show. It was July, and hot, and Joe and I went for a buggy ride. Suddenly a cloudburst; lightning strikes near the road, the horse bolts and I'm thrown out - six months along! Nothing happened except I got scared and muddy.

Comes September, and me eight months gone. We're in a little Kansas burg called Cottonwood Falls. In bed in our own tent - another storm, and the wind blows the tent down on us. Joe all tangled up and frantic and me on the ground laughing. Too young to know better, I guess, but by that time I was just that sure I was going to have that baby when my season come.

Now, late in September, and Buster expected any week, any day - and off the stage I fall. No business there - wasn't allowed on in my condition, but it was after the show. Like a ninny I stepped down onto a folding chair; it folded, and down I went.

Joe picked me up, swore a little, then said,

"Thank God! That's the third accident. Now we'll be all right." "

Joe Keaton: 'Between the acts [of Kathleen Mavourneen,] we sold patent medicines, guaranteed to cure everything and stop anything- including cyclones. But after the cyclone passed, all we had left was the repertoire. The tent and the medicines were gone. That evening, when I got back to our roominghouse in Piqua, after chasing our tent all over the country, the landlady told me our troupe had been increased to five.

My wife had given birth to a son- our first baby. I was awfully glad. I could see the time coming when the little feller got some older, when I wouldn't have to play the bloodhound in Uncle Tom's Cabin.'⁶ 1927.

1895, Oct 4, Joseph Frank Keaton born in Piqua, Kansas.⁷

Well, I was born with a show- a tent show.

Myra: "...those popping brown eyes buttoning on a sobersides face."

Joseph Frank Keaton, that's correct. Frank. In the early days there was no such thing as Frank, it was a nickname for Francis, but his uncle, Frank Keaton was *Frank* Keaton, and Buster was named after his uncle, so his middle name was Frank, never Francis. But 'Who's Who,' had him a year off, always, I think they had him born in 1894, and named Francis. 'Who's Who' was like a Bible, you know, people read it in there and that's it forever, when it was wrong.

⁶[Possibly the lowest form of theatrical part???

⁷[Or Pickway and occasionally Picqua. Piqua, Kansas, is between Yates Center and Iola on Highway 54. Times Atlas of the World, 1991. Blesh says Pickway is a corruption of the name of the Pickaway tribe of indians. I suspect that Piqua is pronounced Pickway, and that Pickway is thus a logical mistranscription.]

In fact I was born in a farmhouse near the show grounds in a little town called Piqua, Kansas, on October the fourth, 1895, during a one day engagement of the roadshow, a one night stand. My birth was comparatively uneventful, though the little village of Piqua was blown away in a cyclone soon afterwards. In addition to the humiliation of having my birthplace blown right off the map, I had to share Mom's milk with the papoose of the Kickapoo squaw who had none of her own. Mother and I were left behind in Piqua for two weeks. So I was born really with the show.

At the age of two weeks we rejoined that tent show; and I signed up with the Keaton Houdini Medicine Show Company. I have never been off the stage or out of the amusement business since that day, except for a year or more when I was at Camp Kearny and in France.

It was Houdini who dubbed me Buster.

I was six months old, in some little town, small hotel, and I fell down a full flight of stairs, and I lit at the bottom. They come running up. I sat up and just shook my head, and shook it off, and didn't cry; so they knew I wasn't hurt. And Houdini says, "That was sure a buster." meaning a fall, (because that's the only time it was used, it meant a bronco buster or a fall, it was never used as a name.) My Father says "Well, that'd be a good name for 'im." "Don't sound bad." So that's the name I got.

Myra Keaton: "It was late morning upstairs in a boardinghouse when Joe and I heard this sudden racket. We rushed out- my God!- there's our baby lying in a heap down on the next landing. Somehow he'd inched out of our room and, bang! down the stairs. Harry Houdini and his wife Bessie, who were in our company, got to him ahead of us. Harry grabbed the baby up, and the confounded kid began to laugh.

Houdini gasped and said,

"That's some buster your baby took."

Joe looked down and said,

"Well, Buster, looks like uncle Harry has named you." He's been Buster ever since. That was a good five years before the Buster Brown cartoons appeared."

As far as I have been able to learn I was the first man given that nickname. Even Buster Brown, the character in R.F. Outcault's comic strip, was born a few years after I came into the world. Everybody, including each of my three wives, always called me Buster.

My parents were my first bit of great luck. I cannot recall one argument that they had about money or anything else during the years I was growing up. Yet both were rugged individualists. I was their partner, however, as well as their child.

My father, Joe Keaton, was five foot eleven, a natural dancer with a great pair of legs to do eccentric work.

Like..."A pair of shears."

Dad was a natural comic, a natural clown, and a fine eccentric and soft-shoe dancer. He was the most gifted man at taking a fall I ever saw in action- he wasn't exactly an acrobat, but darn near. He was the original man with a table, a comedian who crawled over, under and around a table. He was just a very funny man. He was also one of the country's best rough-and-tumble fighters. Unlike my mother, he was not born to show



business. He had to fight, wisecrack, and hoof his way into it. But once there, he counted himself a man who had made it all of the way to the Promised Land.

Yet, as much as he loved being an actor and slap-stick comedian, tasting the applause, and listening to the laughter he created, it was not the main thing in life for him.

Above all else, Pop was a convivial soul, and he sure was in the right business for it. Travelling from city to city every week meant constant and pleasant surprise encounters with his pals, actors we'd worked with on bills in Seattle, Boston, Louisville, New Orleans. Every week was old home week for my Pop. Every town we played was, for him, like being back in his home town of Terre Haute, Indiana.

Pop knew Will Rogers in Oklahoma. Harry Houdini was his first business partner. He was the pal and admirer of Fred Stone, George M. Cohan⁸ and his jovial father, Jerry, Billy B. Van, Jack Norworth, Al Jolson, McIntyre and Heath, Gus Edwards, the Avon Comedy Four, Doyle and Dixon, and just about everyone else who was around and up and doing in the old two-a-day days. In each town we played he would have reunions with some of these talented men. There would be long nightly sessions of drinking beer, eating free lunch, and swapping hilarious reminiscences. And if by some horrible accident everybody on the bill was a stranger, Pop belonged to the Elks and a dozen other fraternal organizations whose members everywhere welcomed him at their clubhouses with open arms and free-flowing beer spigots.

Guy G. Frittz, Reporter: 'My home is in Pittsburg, Kansas, and I first met the Keatons there in 1897... Joe and his wife drifted in there looking for an engagement and got work at the park. Joe did his acrobatic act and his wife appeared in a saxophone speciality. Both played parts in the dramas they were putting on.

...At the close of the park Joe Keaton went away to join the J.T.R.Clark medicine show and it wasn't long until he got an engagement for his wife Myra and wired her to join him.

Buster...was a mere babe at the time. He was sick and Mrs Keaton couldn't take him with her. My mother took charge of the youngster and kept him until he got well enough to join his parents. While the Keatons were with the medicine show they toured the mining towns of Kansas..'

Myra: "Joe started doing a trick that if he ever missed, nothing saved his shins. He began jumping from the floor clear up onto the seat of a chair that stood on top of his table right at the edge. It ain't easy to jump over four feet straight up in the air. When he got tired he missed, and his shins scraped on the chair rungs and the table edge. That one week at Huber's fixed him proper. To the day he died, near eighty, his legs were discoloured from the knees on down. Six shows a day were almost more than he could stand. Our hours were from three P.M. to three A.M. But the crowd hollered for that jump, hoping he'd miss." 1900.

THE THREE KEATONS.

One day my dad looked at me and said,
"Son, you better get into show business, 'cause with a face like that you'll never get a job anyplace else."

⁸ George M. Cohan was the top musical comedy writer/performer of his day.

Having no baby sitter, my mother parked me in the till of a wardrobe trunk while she worked on the stage with Pop. According to him, the moment I could crawl I headed for the footlights.

[Buster started crawling at nine months.]

Myra: "Scuttling like a crawdad on a creek bottom. Heavens knows how that kid ever got out of that trunk. Maybe someone lifted him out to get a costume then forgot to put him back in."

"And when Buster learned to walk," Pop always proudly explained to all who were interested and many who weren't, "there was no holding him. He would jump up and down in the wings, make plenty of noise, and get in everyone's way.."

"We'd be doing a melodrama, Joe would be rescuing me- the innocent maiden- from the villain's clutches and here would come Buster onstage. Toddle over to me piping

"Mama." then to Joe piping

"Papa." and that was it. Show was over."

<1898>

If neither Mom nor my father ever worried about my getting hurt on the stage it may have been because of a rather full day I put in while we were in some little Kansas town. I was not yet three, so it was just about the time they were quitting the medicine-show business for vaudeville.

On this particular morning I wandered out into the back yard of the boardinghouse where we were staying. The hired girl was wringing out clothes. The wringer fascinated me, and I stuck my index finger in it, crushing it. So a doctor was summoned who cut off the finger at the first joint. After he bound it up, I cried myself to sleep. When I woke up I once more went adventuring in the back yard. This time I saw a peach I wanted, but it was too high for me to reach. Being a resourceful little chap, I managed to find a brick to throw at it. I missed the peach, but the brick fell on my head, splitting it open. The doctor was summoned again, this time to sew three stitches in my scalp.

Again I was put to bed. This time I was awakened by the noise of a Kansas twister. Getting up I went to the open window to investigate the swishing noise. I didn't fall out of the window, I was sucked out by the circling winds of the cyclone and whirled away down the road. I had rolled and revolved about a block from the farmhouse when a man saw me, rushed out, scooped me up, and carried me to the safety of the nearest storm cellar.

[After this day Myra insisted on keeping Buster close to her, which meant at the theater.]

A clothes wringer, a peach tree, and a cyclone- a pretty strenuous day, as anyone will admit., but superb conditioning for my career as 'The Human Mop'. They put me on the stage. And for keeps. One way or another I've been there ever since.⁹

Nearly half a century later, a friend who had driven from New York to California mentioned that he had passed through Piqua. Buster's face lighted up.

"Then, I'm not the man without a birthplace after all."

⁹[Dardis calls the missing finger joint '..the one that he may have lost in the clothes wringer.' , throughout Buster's career the missing finger joint is clearly visible in photos and films, though Buster holds his hand so that it is hardly noticeable. Photos printed wrong way round can be spotted easily as they appear to show the joint missing on his left hand, where in fact it is his right index finger.]

He went on to say how his stories of those fantastic happenings had too often met with polite, ill-concealed disbelief.

"I show them this missing finger and this scar here on my face, and it doesn't convince them. I never dared mention Piqua, figuring it wasn't there any more. It was the cyclone story that was too much, but recently Time magazine came out with this." He produced a clipping. The article described a cyclone at Udall, Kansas. Buster pointed a triumphant finger to the key sentence: 'Barber Henry Norris went to bed, woke up unhurt in the street: "I don't know how I got there,"'

I was a kid born backstage. I was practically born on the stage.

I was first carried onto the stage at the age of three months. My father and mother with their act got into vaudeville and got to New York, and of course they slapped make-up on me as soon as I could walk, just for the fun of it and their own amusement, I guess; and also to see if the kid took to an audience. Before I was three I toddled onto the stage. But it was in 1899 at the age of three, when my parents were already in vaudeville, that I first walked the boards; so by the time I was four years old I became a regular and officially joined my parents act.

If I say I 'officially joined' my folks act in 1899 it is because my father always insisted that I'd been trying to get into the family act unofficially- meaning unasked, unwanted, and unbilled- practically from the day I was born.

Joe: "It seemed easier to let him come out with us on the stage where we could keep an eye on him. At first I told him not to move. He was to lean against the side wall and stay there. "

Oddly enough, I cannot remember Pop teaching me anything. I just watched what he did, then did the same thing. When I was three years old Dad bought me a grotesque costume just like his. So I had big pants and big slapstick shoes¹⁰, with a bald-headed wig, and an Irish beard and whiskers, and I started working with the act. They started playing me in matinees only, but by the time I was four years old I was a regular member of the act, getting a salary.

Joe: "One day I got the idea of dressing him up like myself as a stage Irishman with a fright wig, slugger whiskers, fancy vest, and over-size pants. Soon he was imitating everything I did, and getting laughs. But he got nothing at all at the first monday show we played at Bill Dockstader's Theater in Wilmington, Delaware. Dockstader told me to leave him out of the act. But he had a special matinee for kiddies on Wednesday and suggested that children, knowing no better, might be amused by Buster's antics."

On Wednesday Bill noticed that their parents also seemed amused and suggested I go on at all performances. Pop said he didn't want to use me in the night show as I had to get my rest like any small child. Dockstader then offered,

"You keep him in for the night show and we raise your salary ten dollars."

My Father agreed to try it.

I had no trouble sleeping through the morning, so I was in; I'd earned my first paycheck, and starting at ten dollars a week! From then on I became a regular, a salaried part of the family act.

¹⁰...the type of large shoe so often worn by comedians on the stage and in pictures.

So I was four when we became known as 'The Three Keatons', and I played night and day with the act from then on.

I saw the great days of vaudeville. I got in just in time to see vaudeville go from the ten, twenty, and thirty cent admission fees to the two dollar top, and in fact, The Three Keatons held Hammerstein's Theater record for playing it the most times. You were only supposed to play there twice a year. We used to average four to six times a year.

'The child also tried to imitate his father and mother and whenever he fell down, he rose in all his juvenile dignity, brushed his clothes and apologized very seriously, "I'm so sorry I fell down." ' [George Shtofman, The Journal Every Evening, Wilmington, Delaware, Aug. 1941.]

You'd call our act pantomime. Although my father kept talking all the time, he never said the same thing twice. My mother, as the ingenue-soubrette, played musical instruments and danced with him, and when I came into the act then he got the idea of trying to show the audience how to bring up children correctly. He just tried to convince them that there was only one way to bring children up and that was to make them mind. Be gentle and kind to them, but make them mind. By that time I'd knocked both his feet from under him with a broom.

Even in my early days our turn established a reputation for being the roughest in vaudeville. This was the result of a series of interesting experiments Pop made with me. He began these by carrying me out on the stage and dropping me on the floor. Next he started wiping up the floor with me. When I gave no sign of minding this he began throwing me out into the wings, and dropping me down on the bass drum in the orchestra pit. Father threw me all over the stage, fell on me, walked on me, and every time I did something he didn't like he would pick me up by the back of the neck and throw me through a piece of scenery. I'd just simply get in my father's way all the time and get kicked all over the stage. It never occurred to either of us that I could get hurt no matter where he threw me. Once, it was true, Pop threw me into scenery that had a brick wall right behind it. None of us had noticed it until then. I got a big lump on my head from that, but the lump went down quickly enough for me to appear at the evening performance.

The only thing that kept him out of the hands of the humane society, or from being shot at the stage door, was that I always came up smiling.¹¹

"Real knockabout, but let me tell you, that kid's safer in the air than on his feet." Joe Keaton.

"Joe's right." Myra Keaton.

The people out front were amazed because I did not cry. There was nothing mysterious about this. I did not cry because I wasn't hurt. All little boys like to be roughhoused by their fathers. They are also natural tumblers and acrobats. Because I was also a born hambone, I ignored any bumps or bruises I may have got at first on hearing audiences gasp, laugh, and applaud.

I could take crazy falls without hurting myself simply because I had learned the trick so early in life that body control became pure instinct with me. If I never broke a bone

¹¹[figuratively speaking.]

on stage it is because I always avoided taking the impact of a fall on the back of my head, the base of my spine, on my elbows or my knees. That's how bones are broken. You also bruise only if you do not know as I do which muscles to tighten, which ones to relax.¹² There is one more thing: little kids when they fall haven't very far to go. I suppose a psychologist would call it a case of self-hypnosis.

When I was five, before I was much bigger than a gumdrop, Pop made me the featured performer of our act, The Three Keatons, as 'The Human Mop'.

(For a comedy punch, you reach back clear to East St. Louis¹³, then follow through with a sweeping swing to an inch of the guy's nose. You stop short, and he goes into a stagger, letting his hat fall down before his eyes.) [Picture caption.]

Remember, we wore no pads, I rode the punches or got hurt; you could say I grew up getting knocked around.

Now a strange thing developed. The old man would kick me a hell of a wallop with a number twelve slapshoe right on my fanny.¹⁴ If I yelled 'ouch' - no laughs. If I deadpanned it and didn't yell - no laughs.

"What goes?" I asked, "isn't a kick funny?"

"Not by itself it ain't." said Joe.

So he gives me a little lesson: I wait five seconds - count up to ten slow - grab the seat of my pants, holler bloody murder, and the audience is rolling in the aisles. I don't know what the thunder they figured. Maybe that it took five seconds for a kick to travel from my fanny to my brain. Actually, I guess, it was The Slow Thinker. Audiences love The Slow Thinker.

The dead pan was a natural. As I grew up on the stage one of the first things I noticed was that whenever I smiled or let the audience suspect how much I was enjoying myself, they didn't seem to laugh as much as usual. I guess people never do expect any human mop, dishrag, beanbag, or football to be pleased by what is being done to him.

Some other comedians can get away with laughing at their own gags. Not me. I learned at an awful early age that if I laughed at what I did, the audience didn't; and the experience taught me that I had to be the type of comedian that couldn't laugh at *anything* he was doing. I also learned that the more serious I took everything, and how serious life was in general, the better laughs I got. If something tickled me and I started to grin the old man would hiss,

"Face. Face!"

That meant freeze the puss. The longer I held it, why, if we got a laugh the blank pan or the puzzled puss would double it. He kept after me, never let up, and in a few years it was automatic. At any rate it was on purpose that I started looking miserable, humiliated, hounded, and haunted, bedeviled, bewildered, and at my wit's end. I readily figured out for myself that I was not one of those comedians who could jest with an audience and laugh with it. The public just will not stand for it. My audience must laugh *at* me. And that is all right with me. All of my life I have been happiest when the folks watching me said to each other, 'Look at the poor dope, wilya?'

¹²[Note the exactness of the phrase 'never broke a bone on stage'.]

¹³[East St. Louis is on the opposite shore of the Mississippi River from St. Louis. K.H.]

¹⁴[Fanny is polite American usage for backside with none of the obscene connotations of normal English and Australasian usage.]

Well, by the time I went into pictures when I was 21, working with a straight face, a sober face, was *mechanical* with me.

Down through the years my face has been called a sour puss, a dead pan, a frozen face, The Great Stone Face, and, believe it or not, 'a tragic mask'. On the other hand that kindly critic, the late James Agee, described my face as ranking 'almost with Lincoln's as an early American archetype, it was haunting, handsome, almost beautiful'. I can't imagine what the great rail splitter's reaction would have been to this, though I sure was pleased.

People may talk it up or talk it down, but my face has been a valuable trade-mark for me during my sixty years in show business. Sixty years is right, and if you think sixty years is a long time in your life you should be in show business. Last Wednesday is a long time ago to most actors. The young ones talk of the great vaudeville days at the Palace as though that came at the dawn of theatrical history. When I started, vaudeville was just beginning to replace the minstrel show as the country's favorite entertainment. The Palace was not even built.

My first New York appearance was on my fifth birthday when the act opened at Tony Pastor's Fourteenth Street Theater. In the sixteen years that followed we played every big vaudeville house in the United States, Canada and England, and I lost but one performance despite the fact that we had the roughest act in the history of the show business. They call my first years on stage training. Well, you wouldn't really call it training, you'd call it experience.

There were dozens of other popular family acts in vaudeville at the turn of the century, but none of the children in them was featured as early as that. Many of those kids were very talented, and their parents were as eager as mine to give them the same head-start in show business that I was getting. Managers approved of my being featured, and the reason was because I was unique, being at the time the only little hell-raising Huck Finn type boy in vaudeville. The parents of the others presented their boys as cute and charming Little Lord Fauntleroy's. The girls were Dolly Dimple types with long, golden curls.

Of course, it was impossible then to make a fortune overnight in show business. Your apprenticeship was arduous and took years to complete. Publicity was in its infancy. Nobody could put you over with the public on your looks, your figure, or your sensational love affairs. There were no TV ratings to arouse the jealousy of other stars. Performance was the important thing, almost the only thing that counted. The manager who wanted to know if you were any good dropped in at a theater where you were working and decided for himself. He didn't depend on the calculations of mathematical wizards who had convinced him that they could tell what millions of persons thought of a star after getting opinions from a handful of men and housewives. Instead, he measured your effectiveness by the reception you got from the men and women who paid to see you. As for publicity we felt as George M. Cohan did when he told a reporter,

"I don't care what you write about me, kid, as long as you spell my name right."

In vaudeville, of course, we had no publicity problem except when some adventurous spirit like Joe Keaton foolishly tried to snatch some free space. Most of the time local newspapers, who ran the vaudeville theater's advertising each week, published a few biographical notes about the acts appearing on the next bill, and also flattering reviews. But these appeared in the entertainment section and occupied little space.

CHAPTER THREE.

I become a social issue.

1899>1905. The Gerry Society.

Reformers in New York, Massachusetts, and Illinois, among other states, were tireless in their efforts to stop us all from going to hell via the stage. I guess they meant well, but like so many other sincere do-gooders, they were a pain in the neck, particularly to those they were attempting to rescue. I doubt that any kid actor had more attempts made to save him than did our little Buster. The reason, of course, was our slam-bang act. Even people who most enjoyed our work marveled that I was able to get up after my bashing, crashing, smashing sessions with Pop. One gets trained to falls, and some of those that look the most difficult are really quite simple, if one has been taught.

The Gerry Society in New York, and similar organizations throughout the country that either prohibit or regulate the work of children upon the stage, could never understand this. They always expected to find me bruised and maimed.

The Three Keatons were always better received in the big cities than in the smaller ones, and by an annoying coincidence it was in these cities that the most persistent efforts were made to save me from the stage. I appeared before many different kinds of commissions, and in some cities before the mayor. In two states it was the governor who looked me over to see if I were being injured by the work that I did on the stage. Sometimes I was barred from appearing, but as our engagements were short, we would soon be in another town where the laws might be less strict.

The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (a branch of the animal one), started its campaign the day I made my debut at five at Tony Pastors Theater. The New York law then barred child actors under seven years old. The benevolent Tony Pastor got around that problem by blithely signing an affidavit swearing I was already seven.

Incidentally, at our next appearance at Pastor's, a skinny East Side youth named Izzy Baline was paid five dollars a week to sing ballads from the gallery during our act. He was, of course, the same Izzy Baline who later changed his name to Irving Berlin.

Undiscouraged by Pastor's perjured affidavit the Gerry Society accused my father of mistreating me on the stage. They made such an issue of it that Mayor R.A. Van Wyck, a Tammany¹⁵ man, ordered me brought to his office and stripped so he could see for himself if I had any bruises or black and blue marks.

"Why he is as free of hurt as one of my own boys." said his honor, dismissing the charges.

That summer the S.P.C.C. once more tried to stop me from working when we were booked into Steeplechase Park, Coney Island. The Society's Superintendent Wilson asserted that Coney island was no place for a child of my tender years, because it was full of pickpockets, streetwalkers, and other riffraff.

¹⁵[Tammany Hall: 'REPRODUCTION MECHANICAL 'TAMMANY BANK' is a modern-day copy of a cast iron bank that satirizes the 'fat-cat' politicians of New York City's infamous 'Tammany' party whose corruption was legendary throughout the 1800s- benefiting the privileged classes behind a facade of social reform [sound familiar?] To set in action, place a coin in the comical politician's hand, and watch as he quickly pockets it while bowing a nod of thanks.' Source. Hammacher Schlemmer Christmas catalog, 1993-4.]

Though this was true, the Mayor resented these aspersions on a section that voted democratic every Election day and considered all republicans demented.¹⁶
 "I have been to Coney Island frequently of a Sunday on my bicycle." he declared.
 "I have seen fifty thousand, even sixty thousand people there and have never noticed any disorder. Those people are entitled to amusement as well as the rich. The permit is granted."
 "I have never seen any disorder there either." happily chimed in Mom.
 Mayor Van Wyck turned and gave her an owlish stare.
 "Madam," he said, "take my advice: when you've won a case, don't say another word."

The child-savers continued their battle undiscouraged. When Seth Low, a reform mayor, succeeded Van Wyck, they brought me before him to be stripped and examined, also before one New York governor. They had the age limit raised and we were arrested many times. But our lawyer beat them in court by pointing out that, in most cities and states, the law read: 'No children under the age of sixteen shall do acrobatics of any kind, perform on a high or a low walk wire, a trapeze, a bicycle, play musical instruments, juggling...' and it names everything. This afforded a loophole for me, as I was not an acrobat. There was not one word that made it illegal for my father to display me on the stage as a human mop or to kick me in the face. The law didn't say a word about taking me by the nape of the neck and throwing me through a piece of scenery. As I did nothing except submit to being knocked about we always managed to get around the law.

What most burned up Pop was that there were then thousands of homeless and hungry abandoned children of my age wandering around the streets of New York, selling newspapers, shining shoes, playing the fiddle on the Hudson River ferryboats, and thousands of other small children working with their parents in the tenement sweatshops on the lower East side. Pop couldn't understand why the S.P.C.C. people didn't devote all of their time, energy, and money to helping them.¹⁷

Some theater managers advertised me as a midget to avoid trouble with the do-gooders and got my parents to dress me as one. When I went outside the theater, they used to dress me in long trousers, derby hat and hand me a cane to carry. In this way they fooled some people into believing that I was a midget. In Massachusetts, for instance, they took it for granted I was a midget. Pop hoped the Gerry Society might believe it and leave us alone. On the stage I was dressed as a replica of my father - a sort of stage Irish-workingman type, with overalls and red chin beard. But Pop wanted to make sure that all show people, at least, realized I was his little boy. He put ads in the theatrical trade papers that said I was not a midget and added modestly, 'but a

¹⁶[I have no idea, and I don't think I'm alone, as to what Americans mean when they say Republican or Democrat...]

The Republicans are all rich people, like Ronald Reagan, and Bush, they are all very wealthy people, heads of industry, heads of motion picture studios, anybody that is very wealthy is a Republican, because the laws are written to benefit them. And the Democrats are blue-collar working people that pay most of the taxes, because the Republicans have all these tax write-offs and shelters that they don't pay much in the way of taxes. That's all I can tell you about it. I'm not political. There are a few people, there's quite a few movie stars and people like that that are very wealthy and still are Democrats, but that's the general rule. The income level is what cuts off the Republicans from the Democrats, normally.

¹⁷[Nor can I. This sketch of child poverty at the time is understated.]

revelation in eccentric juvenile talent, properly directed to produce the lasting comedy effects. The most unique character in vaudeville. A miniature comedian, who presents irresistible comedy, with gigantic effects, making the ladies hold their sides too.'

As you can see, no adjective- not even gigantic for a miniature comedian- was too much for my Pop to roll off his old Blickensderfer, the antique typewriter he hauled all over the country with him.

Do you think that Buster missed out on anything by becoming the family breadwinner so young?

He had everything he wanted. The only thing he ever missed out on was schooling. The thing is, I don't think the family would have ever amounted to anything in vaudeville, they would have just been one of those little acts if it hadn't been for him. He's the one that made them big stars and put them into big money from the time he was four and a half. They would have been just a little old middle distance family act, but putting them into the big-time was Buster.

Meanwhile, as I grew older, our act became progressively rougher. For one thing, we never bothered to do the same routines twice in a row. We found it much more fun to surprise one another by pulling any crazy, wild stunt that came into our heads.

The act started with Pop coming out alone and announcing that he would recite. Sometimes he said he would sing a beautiful song. He had hardly started on 'Maud Muller' or 'Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight?' when I'd come out and fastidiously select one of the thirteen or fourteen old brooms that were on the end of the battered kitchen table we used in our act.

Ignoring him, I would carefully sweep off the table, then appear to see something that wasn't there. Picking up this imaginary object with my cupped hand, I examined it and then put it down on another part of the table. This distressed Pop. Stopping his singing or reciting, he moved the invisible thing back to the place where I'd picked it up. I'd move it to where I wanted it, he'd move it back. That went on with our rage mounting until we were fighting wildly, blasting, kicking, punching, and throwing one another across the table and all over the stage.

But our most popular fighting routine was one in which I whaled away at him with a broom while he retaliated by skidding his hand off my forehead. We started with tiny taps exchanged in fun. These were followed by harder blows, then slams to which we gave our all. In the middle of this fight the orchestra leader, reacting as though all this had never happened before, got to his feet, tapped his baton, and had the orchestra start playing 'The Anvil Chorus', to which we kept time by hitting each other.

Mom was the champion trouper of us Keatons. Except for the time out for having her babies she never missed a show. Mom also never complained about anything. Pop ran the act's necessary business, and she was supposed to take care of the money. Like every other woman in vaudeville she carried the act's cash in a grouch bag. This was a chamois purse which hung under her dress from a string round her neck. Because Mom only weighed ninety pounds this presented her with a little difficulty back in 1901 when our act traveled to the Coast for the first time. At each city west of Kansas City we were paid off in gold.

Mom did all right with the grouch bag during the first three stops we made after that. These were Denver, Salt Lake City, and Vancouver. But soon after we started down the West Coast the grouch bag was so full of ten-dollar and twenty-dollar gold pieces

that Mom had to buy a money belt. The reason was that our act was then getting \$225 a week with our expenses very small. The best American-plan hotels¹⁸, where we stopped, charged only \$1.25 per day per person for room and board, which came to \$26.25 a week for the three of us. All of our other living expenses, including tips, Pop's beer, and other modest luxuries ran no more than fifty dollars a week. So Mom was stashing away almost \$120 a week. By the time we started back East she was carrying about \$1,600 on her gold-lined person. I understand that this much money in ten-dollar and twenty-dollar gold pieces weighs almost seven pounds. Mom could be described as truly loaded when she got back where Uncle Sam's folding money was recognized as valid currency.

They always used to joke because Myra always carried all the money in a grouch bag, all the Western states pretty much paid in gold or silver and by the time she reached the end of the tour in Southern California, she was bent over, she couldn't stand up straight any longer, she was carrying so much weight around her neck. That was always a family joke.

I suppose if Joe had been reliable it would have been his job?

It was customary in vaudeville, the women used to do that. But of course it was not customary to have coast to coast or city to city banks either. The bank was a local bank it was a local bank, you put your money there and it stayed there until you came back to town again, so they had to carry the money around with them from town to town. And I presume they might have had a bank account, like in Muskegon where they stayed all summer, or New York where they spent a lot of time.

They were all talking about something. I didn't know what it was, but I knew it was good and thought it was mine - something to go with the basketball. They were calling it the twentieth century.

1900-1904 Keaton's tour vaudeville circuit, Buster boosts popularity of act.



¹⁸[American plan, a plan followed by some hotels of including the price of meals in the charge for rooms. 1:26. K.H.M.M.]

CHAPTER FOUR.

My education.

>1907. School. Prejudice. Whackings. Buster goes to Yale.

Thinking over that exciting childhood of mine, I must admit that one thing I missed while growing up was an ordinary school education. I was so successful as a child performer that it occurred to no-one to ask me if there was something else I'd like to do when I grew up. If someone had asked me I would have said, 'Civil engineer.' I imagine I would have been a good one. But even fifty years ago you could not qualify for a degree with a one-day school education.

That's all I ever had: one day in school. This, when I was six years old and we were playing the Bon Ton Theater in Jersey City. The night before we opened another actor on the bill asked my father if he didn't think it was time I started going to school. "Of course it is." said Pop, but pointed out that I'd have to attend a school in a different city almost every week.

The other actor, a man who obviously had truant officer's blood in his veins, said that school principals would co-operate in every way they could to help me get an education.

"What about matinees?" asked Pop. "As you know we're on some afternoons before three o'clock, and that's when school gets out."

His friend also had the answer to that one. He said my teachers would let me leave before school was dismissed.

"All you'll have to do is send a note explaining the situation." he said. "This would give Buster a full morning in school and also a half hour to an hour of the afternoon session."

Next morning Pop roused me at the ungodly hour of 8 A.M., to hustle me to the public grammar school closest to the Bon Ton. The principal could not have been more gracious. By nine-fifteen I was at a desk with other little boys my age, and fascinated by everything I saw and heard.

Unfortunately, I knew some jokes I'd heard in the Avon Comedy Four's school act and decided to bring joy into the classroom by telling them. The teacher called the roll:

"Smith?"

"Here!"

"Johnson?"

"Here!"

"Keaton?"

"I couldn't come today."

That sent the class into an uproar and even won an appreciative smile from the teacher. Enchanted that going to school meant only putting on an extra show each day, I could hardly wait for the next opportunity to spin my fellow scholars out into the aisles. During our geography lesson our teacher asked:

"What is an island?"

Up shot my hand. When the teacher gave me the nod, I said,

"An island, ma'am, is a wart on the ocean."

Though that brought only a wry smile from her, my classmates rocked the room with their guffaws and shrieks of delight. Next came grammar. One of the questions was: "Give me a sentence with the word delight in it?" Once again my hand was up first.

My answer was:

"The vind blew in the vindow and blew out de light."

The next thing I knew the teacher was marching me, by the scruff of my neck,

down to the principal's office. On hearing the evidence against me, he sent me home with this note: 'Do not send this boy to our school any more.'

After that, Mom attended to the job of teaching me the three 'Rs'. Within a year I could read and write and do sums.

Once Pop made an arrangement with Papa Dollar, the head of a famous German acrobatic troupe, to teach me some tumbling tricks. That course of instruction was even more brief than my schooling in Jersey City.

My father had never been told that European performers encourage their youngsters to learn routines rapidly by smacking them each time they fail to do a trick perfectly. Papa Dollar slapped me once with his huge hand, and Papa Keaton had to be restrained from showering him with hooks and right uppercuts.

"No one hits Keaton's children but Keaton." he kept yelling.

How did you pick up the acrobatic skills that turn up in such films as Sherlock Jr.?

Well, I was just a harebrained kid that was raised backstage. I tried everything as I grew up. If there's a wire-walker this week, well, I try walking a wire when nobody's looking. If there's a juggler, I try to juggle- I tried to do acrobatics- there's nothing I don't try. I tried to be a ventriloquist- I tried to be a juggling fool, a magician- Harry Houdini, I tried to get out of handcuffs and strait jackets.

Do you feel that there is anyone that you learned most from in your early days?-

From the stage it was my father.

He never liked to talk about himself. A part of the reason he was so shy and wanted to be just with his friends at home or whatever was the fact that he was always terribly self-conscious about never having gone to school, and he felt in a way that people flinging their education around, you know, their college and this and that, always made him feel inferior. Business people especially.

Instead of formal schooling I got the best catch-as-catch-can education from my profession anyone could have wanted.

I was a natural mimic and could imitate everything from sword-swallowing to playing a musical saw. I also got instructions in soft-shoe dancing from George Primrose, the famous old minstrel man, and Bill (Bojangles) Robinson taught me soft-shoe and tap dancing. Herb Williams gave me piano lessons between shows, and Houdini showed me a few of his sleight-of-hand tricks. The greatest of all stage magicians never told me his real secrets; how he managed to escape from 'escape-proof' prison cells, from bank safes tied with strong ropes, or from strait jackets. He could do this last trick while hanging upside down from Brooklyn Bridge, or even under water.

By the way, no one ever worked harder than I did to figure out Houdini's tricks. I watched him like a hawk every chance I got. I studied his act from all parts of the theater, from the wings of the stage, from the orchestra and both sides of the balcony and gallery. I even climbed high up in the flies so I could look straight down on him as he worked.

I found out nothing, and the man who once was my father's partner told me nothing. He delighted in baffling me along with everyone else. I recall taking a walk with him one day to a small-town post office. We found a big lock on the telephone there. As always, whether he was off or on the stage, I was watching him every second. But he made a single pass at that lock and had it off. I still can't explain how he did it.

Until William Lindsay Gresham's recent [1960] book, 'Houdini, the Man Who Walked Through Walls' was published, no one ever explained his never-duplicated escapes from strait jackets, strong boxes, bank vaults, and 'escape-proof' prison cells while handcuffed and tied from head to foot. But a great many rumors were circulated about Houdini's extraordinary gifts. His brother, a physician, was said to have taught him to dislocate his shoulders at will, enabling him to get out of any strait jacket. He was supposed to conceal in his mouth a key that unlocked any hand-cuffs put on him. I know just one thing about Houdini: he was not a contortionist. His unique trickery was no simple matter of having flexible muscles and bones. But that is all I know about it.

Those early years of the century were a time of widespread racial and religious prejudice in America, but the last place to look for either, then as now, was show business. This reminds me of a little incident which may have humiliated Bill (Bojangles) Robinson at the time, but which he recalled with some amusement later on.

I was about seven years old when we first worked on a bill with Bojangles. By Tuesday of that week Robinson was broke and had borrowed money from all the grownups on the bill.

His face lighted up on hearing that, small though I was, I always had money in my pocket. On Wednesday he borrowed two dollars from me. He promised to pay it back, but neglected to mention I'd have to wait until Saturday when he got his week's pay.

Nobody else had ever borrowed money from me, and I was very impressed by the transaction. But at every performance after that I asked Robinson, "Mr. Bill, where is my two dollars?"

This depressed him more and more, but he managed to take it until Friday. Then, unable to stand any more dunning, he approached Pop and said, "Mr. Joe, I don't know whether you will approve of this, but I borrowed two dollars from Buster. He has been asking me for it every minute since. Mr. Joe, could you let me have two dollars until tomorrow night so I can pay Buster and not have him asking me for his money any more?" Pop gave Bill the two dollars, and he gave it to me and paid back my father next day.

About thirty years later when Bill was playing with Shirley Temple at Twentieth Century-Fox, he encountered me on the lot. He was walking with Darryl Zanuck, then the studio's production chief. We stopped to chat. Suddenly Bill turned to Zanuck and said, "Mr. Zanuck, don't ever borrow any money from that man!"

You will notice that I quote Bill Robinson addressing my father as 'Mr. Joe', something no Negro performer need say these days. Although the theatrical profession was the first to break through the color line, throughout my boyhood and youth I never saw whites and negroes on a stage at the same time. There were very few negro women performers in vaudeville or on Broadway. The first I recall seeing was Ada Walker, the wife of George Walker, the partner of Bert Williams, when she appeared with Williams and Walker in an all-Negro revue and incidentally sang 'Shine', which is still a perennial favorite.

When Negroes were allowed in white saloons at all they were restricted to the end of the bar farthest from the door. Pop ignored this the night he walked into the Adams Hotel bar in Boston, which was conveniently situated, being directly behind Keith's Theater. Bert Williams, who was again on the bill with us, was standing, as required, far down at the other end.

"Bert," said Pop, "come up here and have a drink with me."

Bert looked nervously from one white face at the bar to another, and replied,
"Think I better stay down here, Mr. Joe."

"All right," said Pop, picking up his glass, "then I'll have to come down there to you."

I am not making the point that Pop had no race prejudice. He didn't know what race prejudice was. Nobody had told him that there was such a thing. Like most people in those days if he resented bitterly something a man did and that man was a Jew he called him a 'damned sheeny'. If the offensive one was Italian, Pop denounced him as a 'dirty dago'. If he was Irish he called him a 'rotten, dumb mick'. But this was more a matter of identifying the rascal than denouncing him because of his race. One of Pop's rare barroom battles illustrates the point, I think. At the time at least three of Pop's best enemies were Jews. Two of them, E.F. Albee and Martin Beck, were vaudeville tycoons with whom he had quarreled for years. The third one was Bert Levy, the vaudeville cartoonist, whom Pop had never forgiven because Levy had taken a telegram for him once and failed to pass it on promptly, causing us to lose a booking.

For some reason Pop was at his best when fighting more than one man at a time. I have a suspicion he considered it both more fun and fairer to the opposition. He certainly was helped by his talent for fighting with his feet one Saturday night when he entered Considine's Metropole, then the most popular gathering place for sporting men in New York.

Pop went there alone. Mom was playing pinochle at the Ehrich house, and I was kibitzing the game. As Pop ordered a beer three college boys came swaggering in. They exploded into jeering laughter on seeing a small man with a beard at the bar. "Come here, little Jew," one of them said, "Help us celebrate, have a drink on us."

They began teasing and tormenting him, climaxing their sport by pulling his derby down over his eyes. Pop could not endure seeing another human being mistreated or unfairly dealt with. If you were being victimized your race didn't count. He was automatically on your side.

"Let him alone," said my father.

"I suppose you're a Jew too?" said one college boy.

"Let him alone!" yelled my father when the other two youngsters jostled the stranger.

The third boy said to my father,

"I asked you something. Are you a Jew?"

"I certainly am," announced Pop, astonishing the bartender, who had known him for years as an Irishman.

The collegiates began to close in on him. One threw a punch. Pop ducked the blow, took out two of the boys with his feet, and with a right uppercut belted the third one clean through Considine's window.

The bartender and the little Jewish gentleman both stared at the shattered glass, then at the two unconscious young athletes on the floor.

"Well, what will you have, Mr. Keaton?" said the bartender.

Joe rubbed the knuckles of his right hand as he reflected, then he said, "I think I'll have a beer." He said he was going to ask the little Jewish fellow have a drink but decided he'd done enough for him already.

Meanwhile, as he sipped his beer, one of Considine's waiters slipped out of the Metropole and summoned the fat cop on the beat.

On the way to the police station with Pop, the policeman asked,

"Why didn't you run?" Joe's face broke into a happy smile,

"Is it too late?"

"Yes," said the cop sadly, " 'tis too late now. The desk sergeant knows about it."

The first Mom and I knew about it was when George Howard, of the Howard Brothers, a great banjo-strumming team, came bursting in on the pinochle game. His timing was bad- Mom had just bid 350 in spades, which pays double. "Myra," George exclaimed, "Joe's locked up in the West 47th Street station house. He knocked three guys cold in Considine's. They're holding him in \$250 bail."

Little Mom, who had to sit on a couple of pillows to be on the same level with the other players, just glared at the other two players.

"I bid three fifty!" she said belligerently.

George seemed to think Mom had not heard him.

"Myra, I said Joe is locked up and...."

Mom waved him to be quiet. When no one outbid her, she laid down her spade flush and other meld, played out her hand, and won easily. Only when she had collected her winnings did she turn to George, and ask:

"How much bail money did you say Joe needs?"

"Two fifty. Two hundred and fifty dollars, that is."

Mom dug down, got the money out of her grouch bag, handed it to George Howard, waved him away, and said,

"All right, deal the cards."

I think I have mentioned that my father was one of the country's best rough-and-tumble fighters. I doubt though that I have emphasized what extraordinary weapons he could turn his feet and legs into. His feet were as fast as his hands, and the flexibility of his legs gave him a big edge over any other stand-up fighter. He demonstrated their amazing flexibility one day when he was helping Mr. Pasco¹⁹ serve a fresh fish dinner. One crabby guest brought his plate back to the counter and complained it wasn't fresh.

Pop was on the other side of the counter. When all verbal arguments failed, Pop swung his leg over the counter, snagged the back of the man's neck with his foot, pulled his head forward until it was only two inches from his own, and said, "It's fresh perch, and you'll eat it." And the man did.

Myra Keaton: "Good Lord, he could hitch-kick ten feet straight up and could go even higher. See that? [Points to marks above the door-frame] Joe was seventy-five years old when he put those there, just to limber up. Joe's hitch happened so fast, that lots of people missed it. But you better see it if he meant it for you. He never laid a hand on a man. That hitch kick could break a jaw."

As a result of throwing me around the stage for so many years Pop's right arm became twice the size of his left. He demonstrated its punching power to the whole family one morning in Los Angeles. This was at the time when vaccination became compulsory. A great many people, including my parents, were rebelling against it. Some children died after being inoculated, and the number of these deaths was not underestimated, I imagine, for they were talked about all over the country.

We were in a Los Angeles hotel when the medical profession attempted to vaccinate us. Someone knocked on our hotel-room door, Pop answered and found three men there- a county health officer, the hotel physician, and a house detective. When they announced their purpose, he belted the county health officer in the nose so hard that he knocked down both him and the other men behind him. They went down like ninepins; Pop slammed the door. We packed within the hour, moved to another hotel, and were never bothered again about being vaccinated.

¹⁹[Pasco's Restaurant, Muskegon, Michigan.]

Ed Wynn: Joe Keaton was "a totally undisciplined Irish drunk."

Neither Mom nor Pop was demonstrative, but not many children expected that of their parents in those days. You were supposed to please them. When I disobeyed orders I got a good clout over the backside. Nobody expected me to like it, or cared whether I did or not. The clout told me in the one way a normal and mischievous little boy understands to behave myself. When I failed to get the point I got another clout.

After I was seven, Pop would punish me for misbehaving while we were working on the stage. No more private spankings. If I smiled, the next hit would be a good deal harder. He knew I was too proud of being able to take it to yell or cry. I don't think my father had an ounce of cruelty in him. He just didn't think it was good for a boy as full of beans as I was to get away with too much. And nothing that I have observed since gives me reason to think he was wrong. All the parental correction I ever received was with an audience looking on. I never got a lickin' from the old man offstage. If he was sore at me for something, he'd save up till we went on, then beat the tar out of me. Once in a while, I'd get back at him by hitting him extra hard with a shovel or broomhandle. When I got started in Hollywood, I put him in my pictures. He's a Union general in *The General*. Making one scene, I shoved the old man off a flatcar onto the tracks. He didn't mind. If you're a low-comedy clown, that's what you expect.

For my last off-stage licking, by the way, I can thank Elsie Janis, then a child performer herself. At the time Elsie was thirteen, a half-dozen years older than I. Our act and hers were playing at a Midwestern summer-resort theater that week. One day she suggested stealing some corn from a farm close by.

Neither of us knew how to cook corn, and we made so much smoke when we tried that the farmer caught us and reported the crime to my father and Elsie's mother, Mrs. Bierbower. We should have been doing better, Elsie's mama seemed let down. She had feared the worst. Pop sure whacked me good that day, but I never found out whether or not Elsie's mother punished her.

Even at thirteen, Elsie's talent made it obvious that she would quickly reach the top of her profession which she did just four years later when she started in the Broadway hit, *'The Vanderbilt Cup'*. Incidentally I have seen stage mothers who were furious, hysterical, given to lioness-like rages and ear-bending tantrums, but never another like Mrs. Bierbower for do-or-die energy in putting the daughter over. Even then, when Elsie Janis sang on the stage, Mrs. Bierbower, watching from the wings with a hypnotized look on her face, sang every note with her as though transported.

Hedda Hopper: 'Stage mothers are nothing new. I remember as far back as the Tartar we lovingly called 'Ma' Janis, who took care of all the cash her daughter Elsie earned. When 'Ma' died, Elsie got so lost in the tangle of her financial standing that she wondered whether she had \$100,000 or a million in the bank. She found she had little left except a note signed by 'Ma' certifying that she owed Irving Berlin \$10,000. Elsie had never made out a check in her whole life, never had more than \$5.00 in her pocketbook.'

<1903>

In our rough-and-tumble vaudeville act I was thrown against the back drop, across the stage, and once, in New Haven, I was thrown out into the orchestra.

On that occasion some Yale students kidded my father and tried to break up the show. Pop, always the impulsive type, did not hesitate to throw me at a young man out in the audience who insulted Mom. The whole country heard about this fracas.

College towns were tough to play. Five hundred students crowd in and they own the house. Only a week before, at Poli's, New Haven, Gaby Deslys, the French charmer who was advertised as the headliner, panicked at the noise and refused to go on. Four hundred Yale students were enraged because she had not appeared. When the boys discovered they were watching an understudy, they wrecked the joint; ruined the scenery, tore up a hundred seats, and threatened to lynch the manager. They were suspended by the university, and Yale expelled about eighty or ninety students. But most came to catch the show the following week, possibly to prove that Ivy League undergraduates could behave as well as so many well-bred truck drivers.

The next Monday the gang was all there, waiting. Three in the front row begin ribbing us. The old man stops and says,
"If you want to be the comics, come on up here and we'll be glad to sit down there."
"Go ahead," they say, "you stink anyway."

Joe begins to come to a boil.

"One more crack," he says, "and I'm coming over."

Then after our first roughneck routine my mother, as usual, comes out with her saxophone. Ma played a solo and the Yale students applauded her modest effort vigorously enough to rock the theater. After she took about six bows Pop stepped up to the footlights and told them with a wink,

"Don't give her too much, folks. I can't hardly handle her now."

A Bronx cheer²⁰ comes from one of the Old Eli²¹ cutups²² sitting in the front row, and one of the needlers yells,

"I agree with you friend. She stinks too!"

"That does it." says Joe infuriated, "Here I come!"

But Joe doesn't go over, not he. I do.

My father promptly grabs me by that suitcase handle²³, pivots, and throws my seventy-five or eighty pounds right out over the orchestra pit, hissing to me,
"Tighten up."

It didn't occur to my old man that I might get hurt, he knew me too well for that - I was just a handy ballistic missile. The college boys just sat there as if stunned.

Joe's aim was perfect. I hit these three jerks broadside. One of them got three ribs broke and the other lost two teeth. One guy had to be carried out. I was uninjured, which surprised neither Pop nor me. We didn't stop the act for one second while all this went on. Joe signaled the curtain to stay up. He knew only too well that there might be a real riot. I'm back up and on with the act before the ushers and cops get down the aisle.

²⁰ [Raspberry.]

²¹ [Old Eli, nickname for Yale Uni. from early benefactor Elihu Yale. K.H.]

²² [Cutting up, the action of behaving mischievously. 1:454. K.H.M.M.]

²³ The suitcase handle was built into the coat between the shoulders.



1905.

CHAPTER FIVE.

The 'Pullman' babies began arriving.

1904>7. Jingles. Louise. Drama. Human projectile..

<1904.> NEW YORK.

Before long there were four Keatons. My brother, Harry Stanley Keaton, better known as Jingles, was born when I was nine. Pop, of course, lost no time in getting my little brother into the act. When Jingles was only a week old Pop was wheeling him on stage in a baby buggy. As soon as the young man could stand up unassisted Pop figured out a way of using him for a laugh finish to our act. He put Jingles into the same Irish workingman's outfit we were wearing, then for our new finish stripped him down to his Kellerman.²⁴

Being a true Keaton, Jingles revelled in the applause. He even liked it when Pop held him by the leg upside down, and Pop and I used the leg as though it were a baseball bat on which to choose up sides for a scrub ball game.

<1905.>

And from the time I was ten both my parents and the other actors on the bill treated me not as a little boy, but as an adult and a full-fledged performer. Isn't that what most children want: to be accepted, to be allowed to share in their parents concerns and problems? It is difficult, of course, for a man of my age to say with certainty what he felt and thought and wanted as a little kid. But it seems to me that I enjoyed both the freedoms and privileges of childhood, and also the thrill of being treated as full grown years before other boys and girls.

Buster was always very proud of the fact that from the time he was eleven and twelve years old he used to arrange all the transportation from town to town and buy the railroad tickets and everything. He'd go by himself and do all of that, because Joe never did and Myra was too busy playing pinochle, so he was entrusted with worrying about all their transportation. So at eleven and twelve that was a pretty good job.

Dramatic News, 1905: 'Joe and Myra Keaton act a background to their little godsend, in the literal sense of the word, for Buster Keaton certainly is the breadwinner of the family...His future would seem to be better assumed if his knack of mimicry were cultivated and developed, instead of relying on the guffaws of the 'lowbrows' in making tiresome use of the child's body for the wiping of the stage floor.'

²⁴[Kellermans were full body tights that were worn by Annette Kellerman and they were worn by many other performers and dancers later on.

'Annette Kellerman earned international notoriety and made history when she was arrested on a beach in Boston in 1907 for wearing a brief one-piece swimsuit in defiance of the current seaside laws. Subsequent publicity started a rush for one piece bathing suits and was instrumental in the relaxation of the laws governing women's swimwear.' My Wonderful World of Slapstick gives 1910 as the year of their introduction into the U.S.A. while having Jingles stripped of his as a toddler. As I cannot reconcile all these, I presume that 1910 was a misprint, and that Jingles was two when the Kellermans were used as described. It is however possible that the Keatons may have had Kellermans prior to 1907 as a result of working with Annette. Again, the scrap book would probably sort it out.]

Like all real troupers it was a matter of pride with us to work whenever it was possible at all. If Pop or I had a sprained ankle we worked despite advice of doctors "to keep off it for the next few days."

All we did was tie it up crisscross with webbed bandage as tight as we could. That hurt a little, but far worse was taking falls with a stiff neck. That was agony.

Some of the stage floors we were on were tough on our act because they were full of splinters. One time Pop fell off the table we used in our act. A thick splinter four inches long and about a half-inch wide was driven into his head. It pinned his fright wig to his head so tightly he couldn't get the wig off. I finally managed to pull it out for him. As usual when he had such accidents we washed out the wound carefully with soap and water, squeezed some blood out of it, and applied iodine.

In my sixteen years in vaudeville I missed but one performance because of an injury sustained *during* our wild and rowdy roughhouse act. On that one occasion I was knocked out for eighteen hours when Dad's knee cap caught the base of my brain.²⁵ This happened at Poli's Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, a date every act looked forward to playing because of the superb plank steaks they served in the hotel across the street from the theater.

I was ten years old the day I missed the show. We had just invented the half-strangling routine which hundreds of comics have been using ever since. In this I went behind a door and stuck out my head. A hand was around my throat and apparently choking me. Pop rushed over to fight my unseen assailant, kicked at him above my head. But when he pulled me from behind the door the audience discovered that it had been my own hand which had been gripping my throat. I'd created the illusion merely by bending my arm back from the elbow.²⁶

At this matinee, when Pop kicked over my head he misjudged the distance, missed my hat, and his kneecap caught me right in the back of my head, knocking me cold. I stiffened and fell straight backward. My head hit the floor first. There was a loud thump, but Pop was so accustomed to me making loud noises with my fist that he didn't realize at first what had happened. When the truth dawned on him he picked me up and carried me out of the theater and across the street to our rooms in the hotel.

I was unconscious for eighteen hours with concussion, causing The Three Keatons to miss that night's performance. The doctors never stopped working on me until the next morning when they managed to revive me, Mom by the bed all the time.

After examining me they told me I was a lucky boy because the base of my brain was uninjured and my skull was intact. If I rested quietly in bed for a couple of days, they said, I would be perfectly all right.

After they left I sent downstairs for some food, and at 1:30 in the afternoon I started to dress. Mom, on seeing me, said,

"Where do you think you're going?"

"It's time for the matinee, isn't it?"

"You think you should..." she started to say.

"Sure, I feel all right."

She sighed.

"Well, for the love of Mike, take it easy. At least for the first couple of shows."

"Sure, Mom, sure."

When Pop saw me walk into our dressing room he could hardly believe his eyes.

²⁵[A fairly likely contributing factor to the later neck injury.]

²⁶[And some good acting. If they invented this trick, and I see no reason to doubt it, it must be his earliest gag to enter the common language of comedians, as so many later ones did.]

As I sat down and started putting on my make-up I said,
"I just won't take any tough falls today, Pop. I'll just take them easy."
And then I thought I might as well tease him a little.
"I'll be all right if you just make sure you don't kick me in the head again today."

There were no aftereffects. But I did take it easy. What got my goat was that when I finally did get knocked off for a few days it was due to an accident *outside* the theater.
[Squeamish readers are advised to skip the next part.]

One night while playing a date at the Majestic, in Chicago, I was delayed and had to rush to the theater. As I raced down the stage-door alley in the dark I stepped on a board with a rusty nail in it. The nail went through my shoe and deep into my foot. I was able to pull off the board but not the nail. The Majestic's prop man had to use a pair of pliers to get it out. I doused the wound with iodine and bandaged it. But next day the foot was still sore, and I limped through both shows.

Next day we took a train to Milwaukee, our next stop. On the train I ran a high fever. The doctor we consulted in Milwaukee said I was on the verge of lockjaw. He slit open the wound and put a drain in it; he warned me to keep off my foot for the next few days. He must have guessed that I had no intention of doing that, for he told me,

"If you don't, I won't be responsible. There is still a great danger of you getting Lockjaw."

That caused me to drop the whole idea of getting up as soon as he left. The theater got a replacement for us. It was the first and last time The Three Keatons laid off for a whole week because of illness.

The one time Pop missed a couple of performances was when he got ptomaine poisoning in Boston.

"I never did like New England cooking," he groaned, "but I never thought I'd be poisoned up there in the land of the bean and the cod."

[The squeamish may re-enter.]

When Jingles was thirteen months old Pop, with the connivance of the press agent of the Keith Theater, in Portland, Maine, pulled off a fake kidnapping stunt that he hoped would get us nation-wide publicity.

The plot was simple. He left Jingles on the street in his baby carriage while he went into a grocery store. Then 'the kidnapper', a prop man who travelled with another act on the bill and was allowed to say a couple of lines as part of his pay, drove up in a hired carriage, snatched the child from its little buggy, and hurried to the Boston and Maine Railway Station. The prop man was given candy to keep Jingles quiet. His instructions were to leave the baby on a bench in the station and then disappear.

The schemers made one mistake: not casing the scene of their crime. If they had they would have gone somewhere else with their shenanigans. For on the chosen day the street before the grocery was being ripped up by twenty Italian laborers, who were eating their lunch, sitting on the curb, when the snatch took place.

They saw the prop man-kidnapper jump from the carriage, grab Jingles, jump back, and drive off. Family men all, they were outraged and pursued him down to the B. and M. Station. By that time the prop man was scared witless. He hastily put down Jingles, and then streaked for the men's room. From this he presumably escaped the wrath of the Italian ditchdiggers by climbing out of the window. I say presumably, because the unfortunate man was never seen again. Apparently, he was completely intimidated, for he did not even come back to the theater to get his pay.

<1906>

Louise Dresser Keaton Born at Lewiston, Maine..

Mom quit the act shortly before Louise was born. For a while Pop toyed with the idea of continuing in vaudeville anyway as the Three Keatons, using Jingles as the third member of the trio. But someone convinced him that managers would resent having a baby palmed off on them during Mom's absence from the act. When I suggested that he and I could work together, he said,

"But it wouldn't be The Three Keatons, would it?"

In the end he decided that we'd become the 'special added attraction' that most touring stock companies hired to appear between acts or after the regular show. When Mom got strong enough to join us we'd go back into vaudeville for the rest of the season.

After much dickering, Pop made a deal with the Fenberg Stock Company which travelled through New England offering such sturdy melodramas as 'Beware of Men!' 'Grit, the Newsboy', and 'In a Woman's Power.'

There was one disturbing thing about working with the Fenberg outfit. Mr. Fenberg insisted on putting us on between the last acts of whatever play he was doing that evening. This wasn't too bad when the show was 'Grit, the Newsboy', but when it was one of the tear-jerking operas it was asking an awful lot of an audience to cry compassionately one moment, laugh at our roughhouse capers for a few minutes, then go back to its crying during the last weepy act of the play.

Sometime during the seventeen or eighteen weeks we played with that troupe Pop got the notion that I should be given a whack at dramatic work in addition to my job as a human projectile. He felt the experience would help me become an all-around performer. With little difficulty Mr. Fenberg was talked into the idea of adding a couple of plays to his company's repertory that had good parts for me. His choices, of all things, were Little Lord Fauntleroy and East Lynne. I was to play the title role of Fauntleroy, (a 'sissy' role,) and 'Little William' in East Lynne. So I was Little Lord Fauntleroy because of my sister Louise, even before she was born.

He did Lord Fauntleroy with one of his Mother's pregnancies and East Lynne with the other. If she'd had more children, he'd've been in more plays.

When we got the script we discovered that infernal part was the longest speaking part, next to Hamlet, in the English-speaking theater. Seventy-five pages- if it was one- and no action.

About wednesday matinee I just got too bored. Onstage she was saying "Here he comes now, as if his little heart would break." - my cue- and I warble "Dearest!" and trip over the center door fancy and do a face slide onto the stage. "An accident." I tell Fenberg.

"Oh?" he says.

That night I misjudged a fall onstage and knocked a Tiffany lamp off the center table. Fenberg lays for me.

"Still an accident?" he asks, with murder in his voice.

Next came 'East Lynne', the all-time tearjerker. After learning all of those lines, doing 'Little William' seemed just a bit. East Lynne is four acts of the cryingest show ever written. The audience starts to cry in the first act, and the faucets are never turned off- sobbing all through the second act; Willie dies in the third; and for a finish, his mother dies in the fourth. I was little Willie, the nurse is my mother, and I don't know it. I'm a poor foundling, you see. But she knows me.



There was a difficulty here also though, because of Mr. Fenberg's spotting us between the two last acts of the show. This because 'Little William' dies at the end of the third act of East Lynne. Now, we do our quick comedy turn right after the second act- no time to change costume. The moment the curtain hit the floor I leaped up, hurriedly put on my fright wig and whiskers and raced on stage with Pop. That meant I had to underdress, as we say, just pulling a long hospital gown over the tramp Irishman's outfit, powder my face a ghastly white, and climb in bed under the sheet, slapshoes and all. The curtain rises; I'm in bed, dying; and the audience reaches for fresh handkerchiefs.

Everything worked out well enough until a highly emotional actress was hired to play my mother in East Lynne. This week we get a new leading lady, she came there to act, and nothing was going to stop her. Determined to outshine Sarah Bernhardt she played the scene where I die with everything she had, including her elbows.

The script called for her to fall on my bed just as I passed away. She works herself up and then, in a low throbbing voice, says,

"Won't you call me mother before you die?" I say,

"Sure- Mother," go "ugh." close my eyes, and die.

I hear her shrieking,

"Oh, my God! He's dead!" but I don't see her coming. Swept away with emotion, in a state of collapse, she zeroes in and landed square on my stomach with both elbows. That brought dead 'Little William' back to life violently. Howling with pain, his feet shoot straight up in the air, exposing the fact that he was wearing slap shoes and baggy pants as he passed on. There are those tramp pants and slapshoes right in the spotlight.

Did you ever hear an audience go to pieces!? Crying until then, they became hysterical with laughter and laughed all through the rest of the play. They laughed at the grotesque incident all through our act, and through the play's final act in which the poor 'Bernhardt' had her own death scene. They were still laughing, uncontrollably, when the final curtain came down.

When we leave the theater, there's Fenberg waiting and looking like War Declared.

He barely opens his mouth, and Joe hollers,

"One word to the kid, just one word, and I'll slug you. Go get that cut-rate Sarah Bernhardt and leave him alone!"

My sister Louise was born two years later [than Jingles]. Then there were five.²⁷ She in turn joined the company. As soon as each of them could walk, they joined the act. If they couldn't walk, they were pushed onto the stage in go-carts.

Though we were famous long before Eddie Foy's family got into vaudeville, for a time Pop had wistful dreams of competing with 'Eddie Foy and the Seven Little Foyes'. A great moment in that act was when Eddie, Sr., stepped to the footlights and confided to the audience:

"It took me a long time to put this act together."

For a start Pop tried to bill the act as The Four Keatons, (though during most of the time there were only the three of us who actually worked), but we were too well known an act, it turned out, to change our billing. Pop had to satisfy himself with the billing he gave us on hotel registers. Using up an entire page, he checked us in this way:

²⁷ [A knotty little problem. Buster says he was Fauntleroy for Louise, but if he did East Lynne after same, then he must have been Little William for Louise. I hope to sort it out from the scrapbook.]

Joe and Myra	K
	E
Buster	A
Jingles	T
Louise	O
	N

My parents didn't even try to compete with seven children, we three were enough for them.

A few years later, so many states had passed laws against the stage appearances by minors that Pop entirely gave up the idea of using Louise and Jingles in the act. We put them into good schools near Muskegon, Michigan, where for some years we'd had our summer home. Both protested furiously, but my parents were firm, and Pop saw whatever hope he had of outdoing Eddie Foy's family act die right there.

<1907.>

In 1907 one unfriendly critic described 'The Three Keatons' as follows: 'The two chief performers, representing themselves as a proud but very abusive father and a solemn child, possessed by the devil and provided with a suitcase handle between his shoulders so that he can be flung about the deck without tearing his clothes, keep the audience, or at least the male part of it, heartily amused. For instance, the father starts making a very poor speech to the audience, while the solemn son, with a basketball at the end of a clothesline mounts on a table and swings his weapon through the air. The rope isn't long enough. The speech continues. The solemn and still unseen son carefully gets down, pulls the table six feet nearer, revolves the basketball and clothesline with great violence and at last knocks the parental hat off and at the next revolution bounces the ball severely against the parental skull. Can you laugh at that sort of thing? Then you can get no end of fun out of the Keatons....'

Once Pop accidentally wrecked another act by tossing me into the backdrop curtain. This was the turn of Madame Herrmann, the widow of Herrmann the Great, one of the most popular magicians. She was working some of his simpler tricks. At the finish of her act she had dozens of white doves flying to her from every corner of the stage.

She was to close the show right after our turn. I suspect that Madame Herrmann had never seen our act. If she had, she hardly would have waited until we were actually on to start stuffing her little feathered friends into boxes all over the back stage. Madame Herrmann's stage costume, by the way, was a quaint colonial dress with a hoop skirt.

In those days, all vaudeville theaters had a house drop (or curtain) which was used by acts like ours who carried no drop of their own. On this were local ads and invariably a painting of a waterfall, a lake, or a river. Pop used this toward the end of our act. He would saunter to the footlights and, pretending it was the brass footrail of a saloon, would put his foot on the curved metal guard over the footlights. I would do the same thing. As we stood there, each resting an elbow on a knee, he would ask:

"What will you have, scotch?" I would shake my head.

"Rye?"

"No."

"Gin?"

"No!"

"What do you want then?"

"Water!"

Grabbing me by the back of the neck he would turn me around and walk me toward the curtain, meanwhile grumbling,

"So it is water you want?"

Then he would hurl me into the painted water scene. As I hit the curtain, it would give quite a bit. While sliding to the floor, the drop's wooden strip sometimes would flap up, and I would be trapped in it. The stagehands then would pull up the curtain a few inches to help me free myself.

That monday matinee at the Bon Ton everything went off as usual until I was sliding down the curtain. Near the bottom I felt a bump as I hit some object of substantial proportions that I couldn't see.

The stagehand pulled up the drop dumping me on the stage. This revealed the highly respectable Widow Herrmann in the most exposed position of her stage career. She had been bending over to stuff the last of her doves in a box near the curtain when knocked flat. The startled birds promptly flew out of their boxes going in every direction. Sitting on the stage, as ribald laughter erupted in the audience, I looked around and saw that the lady magician's hoop skirt had been thrown over her head, displaying her bottom which, even by the standards of that well padded era, was enormous.

In 1907, when Annette Kellerman, the Australian aquatic star, created a sensation with her one-piece swimsuit, we got Mom to put on one under a breakaway dress. She wore a big picture hat with the outfit. For a finish Pop pulled a string that stripped off the dress, leaving Mom playing the saxophone in a tight-fitting bathing suit and that large, dressy hat.

As soon as he could manage it Pop had Louise in the act with the rest of us.[1907-8] He put her in the breakaway dress and the Kellerman. I guess she had just learned to talk when he gave her a line in the show. We were playing that week on the same bill with Robert Hilliard, the Broadway matinee idol, who had a sketch in which a deputy sherriff repeatedly muttered,

"Law's Law!" as though that were the answer to everything.

Pop thought it would be cute if Louise repeated this line in our act. But at one matinee Jingles beat her to it and said

"Law's Law!" before she could get her mouth open.

Thereupon Louise, a girl of spirit, hauled off and hit Jingles in the face, causing him to burst into tears. As Pop wiped off Jingles's face with a corner of his shirt, he told the audience in a stage whisper,

"This family doesn't wait to get to the dressing room to settle their quarrels."

And the folks out front roared.

At the pleasure Palace Buster bursts into real fame.

'A diminutive comedian who is irresistibly funny... keeps the audience roaring from the moment he is dragged on stage until his exit hanging to his father's leg.' [Uncredited review.]

Like most vaudeville performers Pop disliked Martin Beck, who ran the Orpheum Circuit, which was the big-time circuit in Chicago and all points west. As a member of the White Rats, the vaudevillians first union, which Beck fought bitterly, Pop and he had had words as early as 1901. The antagonism between the two increased a half dozen years later when Klaw and Erlanger in partnership with the Shuberts started an 'advanced vaudeville' circuit, to compete with both the Keith Circuit and Beck's Orpheum string of theaters. We were among the many acts signed by the new group

despite black-listing threats from the United Booking Office, the agents controlled by Keith, his partner Albee, and Beck.

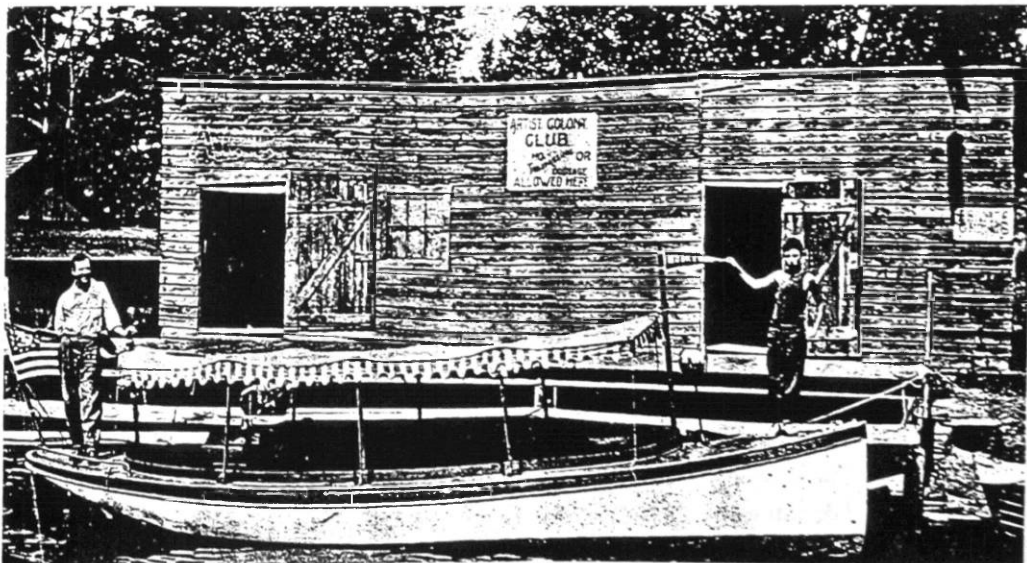
Unfortunately the new venture lasted only three months. Unable to ban all of the deserters, many well-known acts, including ours, were forgiven- for the time being. Keatons banished to three-a-day, Western Pantages Circuit.. Lower salaries.

They say,
"Open the show." we open it. It's going to hurt the other acts a lot more than us. A wild laughing act, and the next four turns look lousy. The big boys didn't give a damn- 'let 'em look lousy, let 'em quit.' The word went down the line:
"Make it tough on all these babies."

So in Oakland the manager asks us,
"How long does this thing of yours run?"
"About sixteen minutes."
"We only want eight minutes."
"How in hell," says Joe, "do I know when we've gone eight minutes?"
"Your problem." So I put in,
"I can fix that. Eight minutes you want, eight minutes you get."

I got the biggest, cheapest, loudest alarm clock I could find, the kind to wake up a battalion. When we walk onstage, I wind it, set it, and put it on the floor. Joe places a kitchen chair center upstage, about six feet in front of our own lake-scene backdrop. Then we go on with our stuff. When the alarm goes off, no matter what we were doing, we stop, I take a pose at the footlights, and the old man announces,
"And now, ladies and gentlemen, Buster will do the standing, sitting, Original Aboriginal Australian native splash dive!"

Then I turn and run full speed- the drums are rolling; use the chair as a diving platform; off headfirst and hit the backdrop with my shoulders, my head bent under. The cymbals crash, the canvas bellies back, and I slide down headfirst. At the last tenth of a second,²⁸ I put my hands to the floor, flip, and my fanny hits the floor. The public merely thought it was another Keaton gag. Only the actors got the point.



²⁸[this is no exaggeration, as anyone who has studied Buster's stunting in slow-motion can tell you, e.g. me.]

CHAPTER SIX.

Lake Muskegon summers.

1908>1911. Fires and trainwrecks. Burlesques.

1908>

He loved every minute of being in Muskegon in the summer, because then he could be a kid and a boy. He had to dress like an adult and behave like an adult in the cities, because of the Gerry Society laws, especially in New York. He just adored being in Muskegon because they either went out in the boat fishing or played baseball all day every day.

The best summers of my life were spent in our summer home, the cottage Pop built on Lake Muskegon in 1908. This was in Bluffton, a summer colony on a bluff just across Lake Muskegon from the town and located on a mile-wide strip of sandy land between that lake and Lake Michigan. Ours was a small place without modern plumbing, or even medieval plumbing. But it was just right for us, had three bedrooms, and in the kitchen the gasoline stove on which Mom learned to cook.

We didn't work in the summer, so for about ten years my life followed that same pattern of dream-like Booth Tarkington summers, with the winter months spent clowning our way around the country.

Having seen values skyrocket in the Oklahoma territory, Pop was convinced that real estate was the one safe investment. This despite a previous purchase of five waterfront lots in Galveston, Texas. These five lots were condemned soon afterward when the city fathers decided to build a sea wall across them. The city paid Pop only a fraction of what the property cost, but when he complained he was told that it was a valuable lesson to him and should teach him to make more intelligent investments in the future.

Bluffton was perfect for us for another reason: there was a whole actor's colony there. About eighteen to twenty vaudeville actors were living there with their families. That meant Mom could play all the pinochle her heart craved and Pop would not run out of fellow performers to swap yarns with. There was a bar in Pasco's Tavern and a club to which all the actors belonged. As for me and the younger children, we just got into bathing suits each morning on getting up and never took them off until we went to bed.

1909>

I tried occasionally to contribute a thrill for visitors to Bluffton. If I saw anyone I didn't know sitting on the clubhouse porch while I was riding my bicycle I would race down the dock there and go off, bicycle and all, into the water. If strangers rowed past our house they sometimes saw something that made their eyes pop. Below the house there was a hill of soft sand which slanted down for twenty or thirty feet to the edge of the water. Looking up from their boat, the strangers would see pots and dishpans being thrown off the porch, then the two children, Jingles and Louise. Before they got over the shock, I myself would come flying out. By going to the back of the house I'd get a running start that enabled me to leap high in the air and come down headfirst, landing on all fours. The innocent observers had no way of knowing, of course, that the sand on that hill was too soft to hurt either the kids or myself when we landed.

By that time, anyway, they were rowing madly to the nearest house, eager to locate a telephone and notify the police that some madman had just thrown kitchen utensils and two children off his porch, and then leaped to destruction himself.

Like so many other American boys I was 'mechanically-inclined.' I spent a lot of my time tinkering, grinding the valves, taking apart and putting together again the motors of our car and the 25-foot cruiser boat Pop bought and modestly named Battleship.²⁹

The Bluffton Club members had a bamboo fishing pole set in a prop on the clubhouse porch which overlooked the lake. On its line was a floating cork which obligingly bobbed the moment a newcomer stepped out there to admire the view across the lake.

When the visitor took the pole off its cradle, he would give it a jerk, starting what proved to be the fish-fighting battle of his life. Meanwhile, his cries and those of the people on the porch with him had attracted the attention of the people in the nearby houses. They would run up with gaffs and small and large fish nets.

"Jerk him to the left!" they would cry encouragingly; also,

"Let out your line!" and

"My God! Don't let this big fellow get away. You'll never forgive yourself!"

When the visitor neared hysteria or exhaustion the fish would dive five feet down, then reverse itself and come back up, as no fish had ever done.

That was usually the first hint the buoyant fisherman got that something might be amiss. At the proper moment someone in the room behind him would say, "For the love of Mike will you let go of that pole so I can tie off this thing!"

After the guest put back the pole in the cradle, the gimmick would be explained to him. The line from the bobbing cork went through a pulley weighted down by a big rock, from there under the clubhouse and up through a small hole in the main room of the club.

We fooled a lot of funny men with that gimmick, including Bernard Granville, Harry Fox, and Frank Tinney, whom many theatrical people considered the greatest natural comedian of his day.

[Buster neglects to mention that he designed and built it.]

One of the cottages near ours was owned by Ed Gray, a big, fat and very lazy monologist. The general opinion was that he was still a bachelor because he was too lazy to get married.

He complained of having to make any unnecessary move, and when the weather was hot he considered all moves unnecessary. It distressed him even to fan himself.

I liked Ed Gray and worked on several devices to save him the agony of having to stir. One of the worst trials of his life, he said, was having to get up in the middle of the night to close the window when it rained. He was most grateful when I rigged up a contrivance that enabled him to close or open the bedroom window without leaving his bed.

Ed had only one clock in the house and no watch. But he complained that he had to change the position of the clock on the mantel in the hall each time he went into another room. He couldn't thank me enough when I rigged up a turntable for the clock with strings attached. By pulling one of the strings he could turn its face to whichever room in the house he was in.

<1910>

Ed Gray's habitual afternoon remark was...

"It's a nightmare getting up."

[Buster, on volunteering to fix the problem, asks]

"What time will it be?"

Gray...[after much thought]

"Ten."

²⁹[This inclination was definitely not inherited from Joe, who, it is well attested, was both mechanically inept, and feared and hated machines.]

[Buster then built a machine that lit the gas under a coffeepot, snatched away the blankets and finally rocked the bed violently. It swiftly became a local spectacle, small crowds came to view..] You know, in a month or so, that infernal gadget really trained him. Sometimes he'd get up even earlier all by himself and eat. Then if he saw people coming up the hill, he'd crawl back in bed and go through all the motions. A real trouper.

<1911.>

"Now there is just one more thing, Buster," he said one day, "that somebody could do for me that would make my life a complete delight. But I'm afraid not even you can help me solve this problem."

On being pressed, Ed Gray said the problem concerned his outhouse which sat on top of a hill commanding a view of both beautiful lakes. Picnickers who came to the vicinity either for an afternoon in the country, or to pick wild grapes and berries which grew in the sandy soil in profusion, were forever using his outhouse.

"And at the most inconvenient times," he said. "Warnings on signs reading 'Private' or 'Personal Outhouse', 'Watch Out for Gnats!' and 'Beware! Giant Bulldog at Large!' have not stopped these- shall I say- squatters."

To stop this abuse of his facilities I bought some spring hinges and cut his outhouse's four walls into separate panels. I also cut the roof of this refuge in two, and nailed each half to opposite sides of the outhouse. I put a long pipe under the outhouse and attached a bolt. From the bolt I ran a line to Ed's kitchen window, hanging on it some red flannel underwear and old shirts to make it look like a clothesline.

With all of that done Ed merely had to sit by a window and wait. If any trespasser- stranger or friend- had the audacity to use his outhouse, Ed jerked the clothesline causing all four sides of the outhouse and the roof of it to fall outward. The helpless intruder was then revealed in the same position as Whistler's Mother, but sitting on a less dignified perch.

This was a good many years before Chic Sale wrote 'The Specialist',³⁰ but when that curious little book became a best seller Chic came to Bluffton just to see Ed Gray's outhouse and graciously put his stamp of approval on it. He said it was a masterpiece of its kind, and he regretted that modern plumbing would one day make it obsolete.

<1912-3> EXILES IN THE WOODS.

[One day] Joe Keaton took Buster aside and said...

"Stay away from local girls or their old man will have a shotgun at you.
Stay away from street chippies or you'll be in a hospital for life.
When you're ready, if you need dough I'll loan you the two dollars.
The only safe place is the best place in town, Della's."

I had a friend in Muskegon named Bob. We had the afternoon and his house all to ourselves. This local girl came over. She started fooling around. We made molasses taffy. We ate it. But she kept fooling around- cute as a bug's ear and dying for experience. So all right, let the lady have her way.

Later on we all went out and had banana splits. Three scoops, fresh strawberries and raspberries, pineapple, chocolate, whipped cream, nuts, and cherries- all for a dime.

We took her home then and start for Bluffton, driving slow, and talking it all over. Suddenly a souped-up Ford pulls up alongside- the sheriff and some woman.
"Pull over to the curb!"

³⁰[The Specialist, By Charles (Chic) Sale 'America's great rural character actor'. Angus and Robertson. 1929. A very short [30 pages] and very funny little book purporting to be the sage advice of a carpenter who has specialised in building only outhouses.]

"Whillikers," says Bob, "that's her mother!"

I don't stop to think, just quick-shift down to second, step on the gas pedal, and off we go with the Model T right behind us.

We reach a place where the paving ends and the streetcar tracks leave the street. I whip the wheel over and take to the tracks. The sheriff sticks to the dirt road, and we lose him fast.

At Bluffton we ditch the car and head straight into the Blackjack woods to the cabin of a hermit we knew. He was called Beanie because he lived on pork and beans. There we hole up. After two days Beanie disappeared early one morning, and the next thing we knew we heard a klaxon blowing.

"That's Lex's Dixie Pirate." I said. And, sure enough, there's his speedboat just offshore. We swim out, and Lex heads back.

"Everything's hunky-dory." he says.

Mom told us the rest of the story. When he lost us, the sheriff located Joe at Bullhead Pasco's. The girl's mother started speaking her piece, and Pasco jumped in. "Hell, we all know you, lady," he says, "who doesn't?" Everyone laughed, and then Bullhead says to the law,

"What kind of a shakedown is this?" The sheriff says,

"Holy hell!" and walks out.

[Later I told Myra,]

"I didn't know that about her mother. Honest I didn't. If I had, I never would have fooled around with the poor kid."

FIRES AND TRAINWRECKS.

Whenever a standard act like ours had a few free weeks during the winter it moved to New York, generally to one of the theatrical boardinghouses that lined West 38th Street in those days. These were within walking distance of both the Broadway offices of America's greatest showmen and of the theaters housing the new shows which the vaudevillians were eager to see.

There were a lot of good boardinghouses on that street, but our favorite was the Ehric House which was run by a German family. The food was good, the atmosphere was friendly, the rooms were large and comfortable, with lots of storage space in case you wanted to leave a couple of trunks behind while you went on the road. There were good boardinghouses for actors, of course, in the other big cities. Two I remember with particular fondness are Zeiser's in Philadelphia and Mother Howard's in Baltimore.

It was in Ehric's on a freezing night that a long series of disasters, including fires, train wrecks, and other accidents began to imperil the lives and property of us bewildered and innocent Keatons. With the temperature one below zero and the streets outside covered with ice and snow, a fire started in the cellar.

At two o'clock that morning smoke started billowing up through the floors of the house. We had a large room on the second floor rear, but the smoke was so thick by the time we were awakened that we didn't even have time to dress.

"Where's your father?" asked Mom. I knew he was at the saloon at the corner of Eighth Avenue and 38th Street, but I just shrugged, knowing what she'd say if I told her.

There was no time to dress, so I grabbed Jingles and Mom grabbed Sis. We managed to make our way safely to the street with the other boarders. The neighbours took in all of us, wrapped us in blankets, and gave us coffee. As soon as Mom and the kids were taken care of, I tore down to the corner saloon to tell Pop about the fire. He had seen the engines but didn't know the Ehric house was their destination.

Shouting to the bartender to wrap me in warm clothing, he rushed out. As it turned out we had lost nothing. Thanks to the firemen the flames never reached above the

ground floor. The dining room furniture was destroyed, and Mrs. Ehrich's silverware, stored in the top drawer of a bureau, had melted into one vast lump of metal.

Not long after this, fire broke out in the cellar of a Chicago theater while we were working on stage. This was not too long after the heartbreaking Iroquois Theater fire there which cost hundreds of lives.³¹ The audience remembered that holocaust only too well. From the moment smoke started curling up from the floor, they seemed on the verge of panic. But at the last moment the theater manager was able to convince them that the fire was under control and could not spread.

That summer we were in two more boardinghouse fires.

One was at the Canobie Lake Hotel, near Salem, in southern New Hampshire. The matinee was on at the Casino theater, close to the hotel; the kids were playing in the park. When Pop heard the fire engines he raced straight for that tinderbox called a hotel and up two flights of stairs. He managed to gather up the clothes and get them into wardrobe trunks which he threw down the stairs. Our losses were small compared to the other actors living at the hotel.

"I have a strange feeling that this can happen again any time," said Pop when he rejoined his admiring family, "but next time I'll be prepared for it."

Later he explained to Mom and me how he planned to cope with smoke, fire, and flame. A scarf (he pointed out) was always on the bureau in the rooms wherever we stayed. He would pick up the four ends of this and everything on the bureau top and dump it all on the bed. Next he would throw everything in the bureau drawers on the bed. Finally, he would go into the bathroom, gather up everything there in a large Turkish towel and get that stuff on the bed. All he then would have to do was tie up all of this and throw it out of the window.

"After that," he concluded triumphantly, "I will throw out our trunks and other luggage."

At our next fire it worked splendidly - except for a couple of details. This fire occurred later that summer, at the Lake Hotel, just outside of Toledo, Ohio.

One detail was an ink bottle which turned out to have him bewitched. He picked it up from the mantel and, handling it as though it were a gem, put it down on a table, picked it up, put it down on the bureau. The third time he picked it up he threw it out of the window and broke the spell.

The second detail was his forgetting that the wardrobe containing our clothes was detachable. When Pop fought his way to the wardrobe he made a wild swipe, hoping to grab all of the clothes at once with that one swing. He managed to disengage every hanger but one. Unable to see what he was doing, he yanked away. The one hanger remained caught on the hook with the result that he dragged the whole heavy walnut wardrobe down on top of himself. Down he went. Then he had to fight his way out of that, and all of the clothes as well. With the smoke thickening and choking him more by the minute, he wrestled out. Pop managed to throw everything, trunks, the clothes, out of the window, dashed downstairs, and joined us on the lawn. But when he did he said,

"Damn it, I forgot my typewriter."

Though the smoke was thicker than before Pop dashed back into the burning hotel and picked up the typewriter. But he couldn't walk straight because of the dense

³¹[Dec.31,1903. 578 people died when the asbestos stage curtain jammed, allowing a backstage fire free rein. Eddie Foy appealed for an orderly exit to no avail. Many escaped the flames only to be trampled to death in the panic.]

smoke, he couldn't bend down or even do a Russian Kazatsy.³² Then he came three flights down, smoke so bad he crawled down headfirst, keeping his head low and his nose an inch from the floor, dragging his precious typewriter with one hand. Pop would have been killed if he had delayed a moment longer. He fell against the door, and the fireman pulled him out. As he got out of the building this time the second floor collapsed with a terrible crash. Ten minutes later the whole shebang caved in.

Number three came next summer. Two weeks after leaving Muskegon that fall it happened again. We were playing Sioux City, Iowa. when that fire broke out. Our room this time was on the third floor. It's late morning, Mom was taking a bath and Pop was down at the post office getting our mail. The first he knew about a blaze was when he saw the red fire engines racing past him on their way to the scene.

"I bet it's the damned hotel." he yelled to nobody in particular.

It was.

"FIRE!"

Hah! We're trained!

Everybody did the usual. Throw everything on the bed, tie the bedspread corners, heave it out the window. Then I grabbed Louise; [5-6 months], and Mom climbed out of the bathtub, grabs a kimono, and got Jingles. Out the window and down the fire escape.

The Old Man runs home. The firemen had just put up their ladders to the roof of the store on the hotel's ground floor, but Pop clambered up one of these ahead of them while they yelled their brains out at him. He got to the room in time, got the trunks out, gathered up our stuff and threw it out of the window. Joe saved everything. Even his bottle of ink. Always saved that.

That was the last of the fires.

But beginning with that same season we started getting involved with train wrecks. Our first one occurred while we were traveling on a Lehigh Valley train from Albany, New York, to Scranton, Pennsylvania. We were sitting in reversible seats, except for Jingles who was lying asleep on a seat. Mom, Louise, and I were on the other seat. Pop, as usual, was in the smoking car gabbing happily away about the five Keatons.

Suddenly, there was a jolt and an ear-splitting crash. The train had plowed right into a freight train, derailed two cars, and climbed on top of the freight train's caboose. Jingles was jarred right over to the other seat, flying across the aisle just as the seat backs reversed. He rolled under the moving seat backs without even being touched. He did not even wake up, thus winning the undisputed title as the sleeping champion of all the Keatons.³³

The following spring, while on our way of Norfolk, Virginia, we were rolling through the Blue Ridge Mountains. For three days it had been raining heavily. We were at a point on a side of a mountain with a 200-foot drop on one side and craggy mountains towering on the other side.

Once again there was a jolt as the engineer braked the train. But this time there was a different noise. He had stopped less than a dozen feet from a landslide. On inspection, this proved to be twenty-five feet high and a city block long.

After some consultation with the other trainmen the engineer decided to back up. Just then there was a landslide in the rear which didn't miss the end car by more than

³²[The Russian word pronounced this way means Cossack, thus a cossack dance.]

³³[Reversible seat backs are hinged in the middle of the seat, the back is in position only at each end of the arc, leaving a fairly wide gap between the back and the seat in the middle of the arc.]

thirty feet. But we all got our hand luggage and climbed over the muddy rubble, tree roots, and rocks that covered the tracks. By the time we reached the other side a relief train was being rushed to our rescue.

The things that happened! Like the train wreck not long after that. At least we called it a wreck when we all stopped laughing. That was just before Jingles went away to school. While on the New York to Pittsburgh express, our sleeping car was dropped off at Harrisburg where we were playing a week.

The porter woke us at nine that morning.

All of us were about half-dressed when another train crashed into ours. What a pileup in that compartment! Mom and Louise on the floor, Jingles and me were sent tumbling out of the upper berth on top of them, and then, on top of all of us, grips, boxes, valises, Mom's saxophone and music case, along with the typewriter, all crashed around us and to the floor. We were so mixed up with the luggage that we required the help of the porter and two other trainmen to extricate ourselves.

Nobody was hurt except Pop. When the freight engine bumped our Pullman Joe was standing razor in hand and lather all over his face, in perfect position with the chin lifted to mash his face against the mirror.

We had hardly gathered our wits when a claim agent rushed in.

"Hurt?" he asked. Pop said slowly,

"Well, not too bad."

Without waiting for further details the claim agent eagerly offered to pay \$250 in exchange for a release. The adjuster all but begged Joe to take the check. When Pop accepted and signed the release the claim agent seemed delighted to pay over the money. Joe handed him a couple of passes and says,

"Catch the show tonight."

After that night's show this man came backstage to our dressing room.

"You people ought to be arrested for taking \$250 of my company's money." he spluttered. "If you haven't cashed that check, hand it back."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Pop.

"I thought you were hurt in that railway accident today. But not after seeing you and that son of yours throw each other all over the stage. No train wreck could hurt you folks. You ought to be arrested, I tell you!" and he left.

"Next time you get that urge to force money on people," Pop yelled after him, "wait till you catch their act."

Two hundred and fifty bucks and a new routine for free. In this routine we used the house set. Every vaudeville theater had one of these which represented, usually, a room in a farmhouse. Mom came out in front of this and played the saxophone, ignoring the chaos which erupted behind and all around her. As she played on, Pop hung a mirror on the corner of the house set, lathered his face, and started to shave himself with a big wooden straight razor. I tied a long, thick rubber rope on a hook above the mirror. This was attached to a basketball which I carried to the opposite corner of the stage. With each step I took the audience screamed, expecting the rubber rope to break and snap against his head. When the rubber rope was stretched as tautly as possible, I let Pop have the basketball in the neck as he was shaving his throat with his old fashioned open razor. The basketball would sock him on the head and push his lathered face into the mirror -

bop!

-he gets his face slammed into the mirror and looks like a custard pie had hit him,

with the audience shrieking, Mom placidly continued playing her saxophone. I always had to remind him to go into the routine - he hated the taste of soap. So I'd remind him out loud, and he'd crack,

"Are you trying to tell the author what to do?"

Laughs, laughs, day and night. I remember them all.

All of these near catastrophes and accidents occurred, as I say, within two years, and we were in no other fire or train wreck during the other sixteen years

The Three Keatons were in vaudeville.

[Squeamish people are warned to avoid the next paragraph!]

When Louise was only thirteen months old she proved that she was as indestructible as the rest of us. We had just moved into our second floor room at the Ehrlic house in New York when she walked out of a french window, cutting her mouth practically from ear to ear, gashing her tongue, and throwing both her jawbones out of their sockets. Mom carried her to the street where she commandeered a horse and buggy and rushed her to the hospital. The doctors massaged her jawbones back into their sockets and sewed up her tongue which had been all but cut in two. Louise came through that dreadful accident without a lisp, any other speech impediment, or even a scar.

[Squeamish people may now continue reading.]

With Mom doing double duty, taking care of little Jingles and Sis, I helped when I could by taking the children out for an hour or two on sunny mornings. I did that one day when we were playing at Keith's Boston. Jingles was then five, [1909] Louise three, and neither could work in the act because of the local laws. But we brought them to the theater.

This day I took them to the Common where I sat them on a bench and bought them bags of peanuts so they could feed the pigeons. There were a great many things nearby to fascinate a fourteen-year-old boy, including the show windows of a candy store and a firehouse where you could see the horses in their stalls, waiting to dash out when the gong rang.

Suddenly I noticed a crowd of people standing around a police wagon. As the wagon started I saw Jingles's head and little red cap inside. I ran after it all the way to the police station.

As I was claiming Jingles, a policeman walked in, holding Louise by the hand.

"Here's another lost kid," he told the desk sergeant.

"That's my sister, Louise," I explained.

"Oh, it is, is it?" asked the desk sergeant. "First you lose your brother, then you lose your sister. Now, are there any more little ones that you have left scattered around the city to be brought in by my already overworked men?"

"No, sir," I said. Then I glanced at my watch and whistled.

"I'm in trouble," I told the desk sergeant. "I have a matinee to do at Keith's theater, and I'll never get there in time."

The police sergeant was a goodhearted man. He had his police wagon rush us to the theater just in time for the show.

He used to always take care of Harry and Louise before they got old enough to go to school. When one or the other was a baby he'd take them out in their carriage for rides and he baby-sat them, and all of that kind of thing. When they were older, like when Louise was six and Harry was eight, they went to private

boarding schools while they were on tour. I know Louise went to a Catholic school with the nuns in Muskegon. They would pack the kids off on the train to the family for the christmas holidays, and they'd stay there for two weeks over the christmas/new years and then they'd go back to school. And of course they were there with them for the whole summer.

BURLESQUES.

During my vaudeville years I never enjoyed anything more than doing burlesques of the other acts who played on the bill with us. They would often crowd around in the wings in the friendly, good-natured way of vaudeville people, and be much amused at the monstrous things we were doing in supposed imitation of them.

We played with everybody in variety, and an autograph book which my mother kept for me is almost a complete roster of vaudeville as it used to be, of vaudeville as it was in the days when Tony Pastor's was not only a New York, but a national institution.³⁴

The first I ever tried was one of Houdini getting out of a strait jacket. I was then about six. I just put on my own jacket backward, held the sleeves together, hiding my hands, then wriggled, writhed, and grimaced as the audience had seen him do a few minutes before.

The burlesques of ours that audiences seemed to enjoy most were those we did of the dramatic sketches and one-act plays the Barrymores and other Broadway stars used in their vaudeville appearances. An example is the one we did of 'The Yellow Jacket', a one-act version of a popular Broadway melodrama.

The scene was a curio shop in Chinatown. It opened with a young white couple walking in. When the shop's proprietor looked at the white woman it was a case of lust at first sight. He had one of his coolies stab her husband to get her into his power. As the poor chap's body was dragged out of sight another coolie banged a big chinese gong to announce that death had come to the house. As he did, he loudly wailed a prayer in Chinese.

The curtain went down, then rose on the same curio shop twenty years later. The white woman, now middle-aged, has long since become resigned to remaining the shopkeeper's concubine until the end of her days. But when a young couple walks in she recognizes the wife as her daughter whom she hasn't seen since the girl was an infant. But her chinese master is also staring at the pretty young customer, and the concubine knows what's on his mind. She kills him, then rings the Chinese gong as the curtain comes down.

For our burlesque of this act I attached a washtub under our table, planning to use it during a rough-and-tumble routine Pop and I had been doing for some time. While he was singing I lined up our thirteen or fourteen short-handled alley brooms along the side of the table, with the handles jutting out over the edge. Getting up on the table, I began whirling the basketball around my head, letting out a bit of the rope at a time. The circling basketball kept coming closer and closer to Pop, who continued to sing, until I took off his hat with it. Then he took it on the run, chased by the basketball. Still on the table I cornered him near the backdrop and coiled the rubber string around his neck. It kept coiling, and at the end the basketball smashed him in the face, and he fell, battered and helpless, into the backdrop. For the finale I jumped on the brooms, so they fell on him in a shower.

When we were on the bill with 'The Yellow Jacket', I followed this up by jumping to the stage and banging on the washtub hard with one of the brooms, meanwhile

³⁴ [This book is still extant and studiable.]

jabbering away in my best imitation Chinese. This simple little stunt got such a laugh that we got ourselves booked on the same bill with the sketch as often as possible.

Midweek at Willie Hammerstein's famous Victoria Theater on Times Square...

Joe was onstage doing legomania alone, and I ran into the prop room, grabbed a yellow sou'wester and a lighthouse- keeper's cap, and lit a ships lantern. Heading for the stage, I called to the electrician to douse the lights and throw a green spot on Joe.

Then I stomp out and say,

"There's another thing you didn't know, Martin. I could have married your wife."

Without a second's hesitation, Joe clenched his fists and spat out the words,

"You lie! I gave you the mother, but you'll never have the cheeild!"

Then I get bopped in the face, light on my fanny, and the old man falls over me. Off with the raincoat and hat and back into our act just as if nothing had happened. The audience was killing itself. You see, I had started the famous scene from 'Shore Acres' where the two brothers fight in the lighthouse.

None of the other actors enjoyed this sort of spoofing more than those in the turn burlesqued. They recognized it for the flattery it was. For you cannot burlesque a bum act, only a good one, and almost all performers realize this.

Being freewheeling clowns we were delighted to have the other acts watch us work. But once Pop did complain about it. This was during a week that Alla Nazimova, the great Russian dramatic actress, was headlining the bill. On monday we tried to catch her act from the wings but were ordered away.

"Madame Nazimova," we were told, "is unable to perform while people are milling about in the wings."

We went out front and saw her from there. Nazimova, who later became a popular silent movie star, was a woman with great burning eyes and possessed great emotional power. You had to respect her first-rate talent and concentration on her work.

We were not really offended. We knew that unlike ourselves the people in the dramatic acts depended a great deal on everything being quiet backstage while they were on. Some of them even carried slippers in their trunks for the stagehands to wear while their act was on.

But a day or two after we were chased from the wings by Nazimova's order, Pop caught her, of all people, watching our roughhouse act from there.

"Please clear the wings," he called a stagehand. As far as my father was concerned there was no such thing as a stage whisper.

"How can we do our work while the wings are cluttered up with other acts studying our technique and the secrets of our success?" Pop was sorry the moment he said it. Nazimova's huge brown eyes filled with tears, and she turned away.

Being a foreigner, she didn't understand that Pop was only kidding.

He felt terrible about it. And that night he got out his old Blickensderfer typewriter and issued this invitation:

PROFESSIONAL MATINEE
For Madame Nazimova
Supreme Stage Queen of All the Russians,
This Thursday Afternoon
Please Attend Promptly
As Both Wings May be Crowded

He had a Morris chair put in the wings for Nazimova. She came for our 'professional matinee', used the Morris chair, and laughed at our low comedy antics until tears again filled her soulful brown eyes.

Most of the top women stars of vaudeville, like the men, as I said, could laugh at themselves.

The tempestuous Nora Bayes was one of these good-humored sports. Everybody loved her for her cheerfulness and boundless generosity. But she had a raging temper as well. For several years she and Jack Norworth, whom she married and teamed up with, had the greatest man-and-woman act in the business. But once Nora became so incensed on hearing he was taking more than a fatherly interest in a certain young chorus girl that she changed their billing to:

NORA BAYES

Assisted and Admired by Jack Norworth.

Putting on airs was what old-timers most ridiculed. And they would rib the hell out of a woman as well as a man. Fritzi Scheff, the dainty Viennese singer, learned that the hard way. We were at the Grand Theater, Pittsburgh, the week Fritzi, following a great Broadway triumph in one of Victor Herbert's operettas, was headlining there. She had made Herbert's 'Kiss Me Again' her theme song, and she sang it at all performances.

Fritzi traveled in the style of a Russian Grand Duchess. Nothing like her vaudeville tour had been seen since Sarah Bernhardt's last farewell visit to the United States. If Fritzi didn't pretend to sleep each night in a coffin as Bernhardt did, she did everything else. This little lady carried thirty-six pieces of luggage with her and an entourage consisting of a pianist, a chauffeur, a footman, and two French maids. One maid served her at the theater, the other at her hotel suite. A week before Fritzi arrived in each city, an interior decorator redecorated and refurnished her dressing room and hotel suite. Her dressing room's decor featured magnificent mirrors with gold-leaf frames and drapes suitable to one of the fabulous boudoirs at Versailles.

She traveled in a private railway car. Attached to this was a flat car on which her Pierce-Arrow limousine rode. She used the Pierce-Arrow only for travel between her hotel and the theater, or when it was only a short jump to the next city where she was booked to play. She made the longer jumps by train. This wasn't stupid considering what travel over our rough roads was like then.

The air in Mademoiselle Scheff's dressing room was kept freshly perfumed with a delicate scent. And over the door of her dressing room a stagehand fastened an illuminated sign, reading 'Fritzi'. She also had a red velvet carpet laid from the door of her dressing room to the stage.

I promptly got into the spirit of things by nailing a cigar box over our dressing room. I cut the letters- B-U-S-T-E-R- out of it, and for illumination stuck a small lighted candle in the box so the light would shine through.

Bernard (Bunny) Granville, the comedian who did the best 'drunk' act ever seen in vaudeville, was dressing with Pop and me that week.

"Why should I let Fritzi put me in the shade?" he demanded. "I might not have a red carpet, but I have something that is a lot more useful at times." As he talked Bunny got out a roll of toilet paper and rolled it from our dressing-room door to the stage. Within minutes the house manager was in our dressing room. "Fellers!" he said. "What are you trying to do to me? If she finds out about any of this she'll throw a fit. I think she'll walk out. Then where will I be?"

To avoid his having a heart attack, we took down the cigar-box sign and picked up

the toilet paper. But as we waited to go on next day we heard that one of the stagehands had fixed Fritz's wagon. All of us were told, "Just stand in the wings and catch Fritz's first show today and watch how she behaves."

Fritzi made her usual entrance waving a little fan. Leaning against the grand piano she sang her opening number, with the little fan resting against her hip. As she sang the first few notes she seemed to be twisting and squirming. The smile with which she bewitched audiences was half grimace. And whatever was troubling her got worse as she continued. Again and again she twisted away from the audience to scratch her tightly-corseted side with the fan here, there, and everywhere.

All of us immensely enjoyed this weird performance. We might have enjoyed it even more if we had known what was making majestic little Fritz Scheff twist, turn, squirm, wriggle, and scratch. That morning a stagehand had sneaked into her dressing room and sprinkled itching powder lightly everywhere in that elegant room that the great woman could possibly sit down.

Occasionally a little backstage joke got out of control. This happened to a young English monologist who was making his American debut at Proctor's Twenty-third Street Theater, in New York. He was sharing a dressing room with Pop, me, and a popular turn-of-the-century minstrel man named Press Eldridge.

Before the Monday matinee, Press told the Englishman, "You know, there are a great many of your British expressions that Americans just do not understand. Why don't you go over your material with me right now so we can see if you should change anything you may be using?"

The monologist was most grateful. Press, Pop, and I listened gravely, making no comment until he described his main bit. In this, dressed in a bride's wedding outfit, he sang "Waiting at the Church!" the song later so effectively rendered by Gracie Fields.

When the Englishman sang the tag line, "When I found he left me in the lurch, Lord! how it did upset me!" Press held up his hand.

"I'm glad you went over this with me, my good fellow. American audiences just do not like the word 'Lord'. I don't know why exactly, but you must use another word there."

"But what would you suggest?" asked the Englishman.

"Christ."

The surprised Englishman looked at Pop for confirmation which Pop gave him with a sage nod. None of us dreamed for a moment that the Englishman would take Eldridge's advice as even the word 'damn' was taboo then in theaters all over America.

We watched the young Englishman from the wings. And when he came out with the line

"Christ! how it did upset me!" there was one of those blood-chilling dead silences in the theater. Next thing anyone knew the lights went out, the unfortunate Englishman was smuggled off the stage, and the orchestra was playing the next act's introductory number. Meanwhile, Press Eldridge had streaked for the street. When we went back to the dressing room, the poor Englishman was still in his bride's costume, trying to explain to the irate and red-faced house manager how he had happened to utter the shocking word.

"One of the men I dressed with told me to say it instead of 'Lord'." he said.

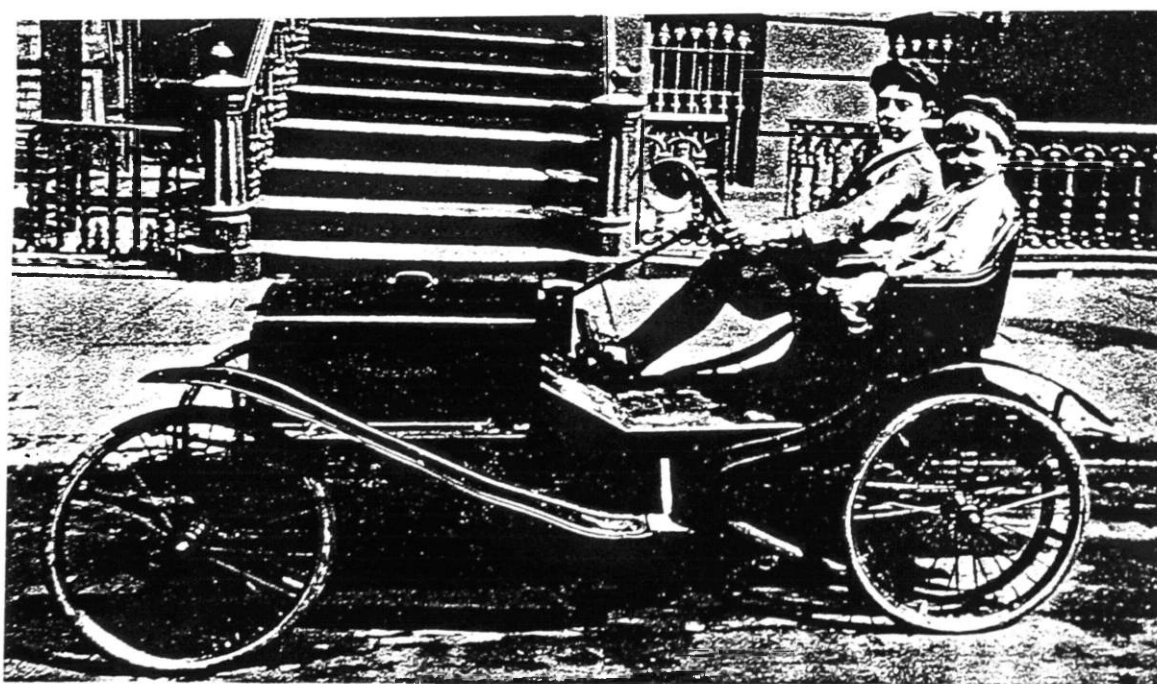
The house manager demanded,

"Which man was it?" The Englishman shook his head, and replied in a broken voice, "I can't remember."

Neither could we. Nor could Press Eldridge when he returned to the dressing room. I never saw nor heard of that unlucky English actor again.

Pop believed that whatever harm Press and we had done him was more than repaid when The Three Keatons invaded the 'alls of the man's native land in the summer of 1911.

Most boys in those days couldn't wait to get to be sixteen or seventeen so they could put on long pants, because up to then they wore knee-pants and long stockings, and when they got to that cut-off age, like sixteen, they were allowed to wear long pants like an adult, and most kids couldn't wait for that. Buster was the opposite, he dressed like a man since he was five or six, and he couldn't wait (laughs) to get past the Gerry Society age of sixteen so he could wear knee-pants and dress like a kid, and have fun and not have to worry about getting something dirty or wrinkled, but this is only in New York. Muskegon, that's another story, but they spent so much time in New York, they spent more weeks and months in New York than they ever did anywhere else.



Buster and Jingles in the Browniekar, in front of Mrs. Ehrich's theatrical boardinghouse, New York.

CHAPTER SEVEN.

The Keatons invade England.

1911>1915. It loses a bit...Vaudeville. Cats.

<1911>

"I always thought I would enjoy the quaint charm of London," Pop often said, "right up until the very moment I went over there."

Though our stay in London was brief, Pop ever afterward would spend whole hours relating the misfortunes that befell us there. His Anglophobia became so complete that he didn't even like to mention that one of his very best pals, Walter C. Kelly, had talked him into going there. Pop seemed to feel it was a terrible charge to make against anyone, no less vaudeville's famous 'Virginia Judge'. Pop preferred people to think that Alfred Butt, the distinguished manager of the Palace in London had enticed us there. But it was Kelly who suggested to Butt that he make us an offer.

On our return home Pop described in a long letter to Variety, the theatrical weekly, the humiliations and exasperations American artists could anticipate in London. His letter is longer, I think, than the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address combined.

Our misfortunes started, Pop revealed in this document, when he made the distressing mistake of buying four steamship tickets for his family instead of three. It was only after he had paid half fare for Jingles and Louise that he learned that they could have traveled free.

Unable to get his money back, Pop said he rushed home and announced that the trip was off, but changed his mind when both Mom and I burst into tears. Nevertheless he made one last desperate attempt to get out of the adventure.

'That night around the '42nd Street Corners' I met old pals, with cheering words, and took in quite a load of Ehret,³⁵ neglecting to check my luggage. I did this on purpose. 'The Boys', thinking they were doing an Old Pal a favor, hurried our trunks to the pier and carried me up the gangplank. I started a fuss when we got on board; anything to get thrown off. I even auctioned off Louise. I commenced the thing by saying:

"Before this ship sails I am authorized to sell this orphan child. What am I offered?" The bids opened up well and I sold Louise to a bright-looking little fellow for seventy-five cents. But when I demanded the money before I would turn over the baby the boy's father told the youngster I was only fooling. That was the beginning of a scrap. But they wouldn't put me off the boat. Instead of us being put off the ship, one of the officers told me that if I tried to auction off any more of my children they would put me in irons.'

Joe Keaton. Letter to Variety.

Kelly's idea that The Three Keatons would be highly successful in London was logical enough, being based on his own popularity there, in the provinces, and such far-flung British outposts as Johannesburg and Hong Kong. For his humor was as typically American as baseball or George M. Cohan's slang. Yet Britishers everywhere laughed at such classic jokes of his as the one about Mandy, the Negro laundress who came to his imaginary court for a divorce. It went like this.

"Does he beat you, Mandy?"

³⁵[A brand of beer so famous in New York that the addition of the word beer was deemed superfluous.]

"No."

"Does he support you?"

"Yes, sir, he brings home his \$1.75 wages every Saturday night."

"Well, then, Mandy, why do you want to divorce him?"

"I guess, your honor, I just lost my taste for him."

Kelly, a kindhearted man, met our boat train in London. He had already obtained accommodations in a boardinghouse for us.

Pop had no English money, so Kelly gave him a handful of coins for tips and wrote down the address of our boardinghouse.

"You get your luggage," he said, "and I'll take Myra and the kids to your rooms. They look tired."

"How do I get my baggage when nobody gave me any claim checks." said Pop.

Kelly explained that claim checks weren't used in London. Pop need only go and point out his trunks and the table we used in our act which Pop had insisted on bringing along. Kelly didn't explain that there were no redcaps at Victoria Station. So after seeing us off, Pop had to cope with a mob of Whitechapel Willies, Lambeth Louies, and other men who looked as though they had been sleeping on the Embankment.

Though unable to understand these chappies' Cockney, Pop selected a half dozen of them. They found a one-horse cab for him, helped him into it, then piled all of our luggage and the table on both sides and on top of him, and accepted the tips he gave them.

On the way there, Pop looked through the rear window and saw the men who had helped him trotting after the cab. Believing himself pursued he asked the cabbie to whip up the horse. Unfortunately, the driver obeyed with such alacrity that the top-heavy cab took the next corner on two wheels, toppling over on its side.

As Pop unscrambled himself from the debris, he said to the driver nervously, "Let's get going. Those men are still chasing us."

"Good show!" said the driver. "They'll be able to help us right the rig here."

"I don't think that's why they are chasing us. Maybe I did something wrong. Maybe I said something that offended them."

"Not likely, sir." said the cabbie. "If you don't mind me saying so, I think you must have tipped them most liberally." When Pop pleaded ignorance of British currency, the man said,

"When we arrive at your boardinghouse, sir, I will instruct you concerning what constitutes a fair tip."

The six men caught up with them and cheerfully helped right the cab and get the horse back on his hoofs. They rearranged the luggage and the table around and on top of Pop. The cab started off again, with them trotting after it. At the boardinghouse they helped unload the cab and carry the luggage and the table up to our lodgings on the third floor. After obtaining the tipping instructions from the driver, Pop distributed some more largesse, and took all hands to the nearest pub for a round of drinks.

We were delighted with the family-type boardinghouse the Virginia Judge had found for us. We all went to bed early and in the morning we were served with a regular London boardinghouse breakfast, consisting of porridge, bloaters, boiled eggs, muffins, and tea.

Kelly was living at the Queen's Hotel on Leicester Square just around the corner from us. That evening he took Pop to a theatrical club in London. Coming up the stairs

at one o'clock in the morning, Pop observed sailors coming out of various rooms, buttoning up their coats.

He hurried to our rooms, woke us up, and insisted we move without waiting for morning. He whispered to Mom, "We are in a house of ill fame." and within an hour we were installed in the Queen's Hotel where Kelly was staying.

At the time the Palace Theatre in London was the world's most elegant vaudeville house, and the only one with a royal box. It occupied a whole block in Shaftesbury Avenue; full dress was obligatory in the stalls, tuxedos in the balcony. On Pop's first visit he found that The Three Keatons weren't even billed on the posters that announced the following week's attractions.

Pop's next unpleasant surprise came when we went to the theatre to rehearse our act's music with the orchestra. He had brought special orchestral arrangements with him. Fred Heff, the New York music publisher who supplied these, had told him to give these to Fink, the Palace's orchestra leader, and to be very deferential about it.

The thoughtful music publisher had even rehearsed Pop in the polite speech he made. This went:

"Is this Mr. Fink? Allow me on behalf of Mr. Fred Heff, the American music publisher of New York City, to offer you this set of orchestrations with his compliments."

"What has this got to do with the act?" demanded the unfeeling Mr. Fink. "Let's get on with it, man."

The rehearsal's first number went off smoothly. But when Mom got out her saxophone the whole orchestra pit started grumbling.

"What the blooming hell!" exclaimed one flute player. "Is she going to play that?"

The trombonist next to him moaned,

"Never heard one that was in tune."

I got on guard in case Pop grabbed me and threw me at the carping musicians, but he restrained himself.

There were matinees only on Wednesday and Saturday at the Palace, which meant we opened on Monday night. Arriving at the theatre, Pop was depressed to find the long line of waiting people seated on camp chairs, being entertained on the street by buskers, including a juggler, a troupe of three acrobats, who carried their own rug to work on, and a singer with a guitar accompanist.

"Why should they go inside where they have to pay?" grumbled Pop.

From the first performance we were handicapped because the stage floor was warped and full of splinters. Pop couldn't use me as a human mop, but he had his usual fun throwing me into the scenery and out through the wings.

We did get a few titters from the gallery, but the stalls, the boxes, and balcony greeted us with absolute silence. Even Pop's best lines fell flat. When I swatted him violently he said,

"He has a mind."

Later when he threw me into the back curtain, he told the audience,

"Children should be taught to respect their parents."

Even when Pop, in desperation, said after a bit of hurly-burly,

"It loses a bit in the translation, doesn't it?" he was greeted by the same blood-chilling silence.

When we came off, Kelly and Blanche Ring, who were also on the bill, both advised Pop to tone down on the rough routines.

"You actually scared the audience." Kelly said. "They think you are hurting Buster. The act is too brutal for them."

Next day Alfred Butt told him the same thing, to tone down the 'brutality'. As Pop was leaving, Butt said,

"Isn't that an adopted boy you use in your act?"

"Who, Buster?" exclaimed Pop. "Of course not. He's my son."

"Judging by the way you threw him around," said Butt, "I thought he must be adopted and that you didn't give one damn about him."

Pop went straight from Butt's office and booked passage home for us on the following Wednesday.

Meanwhile, we continued to ease up on our roughhouse routines at each performance, and by Wednesday we were going good. By Friday and Saturday we were doing great. Toward the end of the week Alfred Butt congratulated Pop on the reception we were now getting and said,

"Now you will have no trouble at all in getting forty weeks of straight booking in the provinces, and when you are finished that tour, you can play here in London for me again."

But Pop had made up his mind to leave.

Pop would never admit that the British had a sense of humor. His experiences in the pubs there had poisoned his mind against the entire United Kingdom. He even refused to laugh at what an Englishman had said about the American monologist, Marshall P. Wilder, who was a dwarf with a face not unlike a monkey's.

The week we arrived, Peter the Great, the smartest chimpanzee I ever saw on a stage, was headlining the bill at the Palace. He seemed almost human as he took off his hat, coat, and gloves, ate at a table with a knife and fork and napkin, roller-skated, rode a bicycle, then took off the rest of his clothes and went to bed.³⁶

Wilder came into the Palace the following week. Londoners then had the habit of dropping in at vaudeville houses just to see again a favorite act, and one particular Palace patron that week seemed not to have known that Peter the Great had concluded his engagement. In any event, one Englishman, arriving in the middle of Wilder's act, took a quick look and groaned,

"My God! Now they have him talking."

That story quickly went around the world and for a time threatened Wilder's career in vaudeville. Wherever he walked on a stage somebody out front was sure to say quite audibly,

"My God! Now they have him talking."

But it was the eating and drinking situation that most distressed Pop. No one had tipped him off that there were barmaids in the pubs. He spent half of one night in London wandering around from place to place in hope of discovering a man behind a bar. Pop liked telling slightly off-color stories almost as much as he liked beer. But he was incapable of telling one of these before a woman. On top of the deprivation of being unable to indulge in his favorite indoor sport, Pop could not drink the warm beer they served in the pubs. He ordered ale but gave that up on finding it the same temperature. Though at the time he drank nothing stronger than beer he ordered a Manhattan cocktail in sheer desperation.

Cocktails were then unknown in London, and the barmaid determined not to be kidded, said,

³⁶[It is generally agreed that a stunning impersonation of this chimp is viewable during 'The Playhouse'.]

"Oh yes, and do tell us about your skyscrapers?"

He also could not endure the uninteresting English food.

"They do not even season it." he kept groaning.

His whole attitude was that of a man who was discovering himself surrounded by Bronze Age savages. But Mom and I liked it fine, and urged him to stay on. Mom pointed out that if we once established ourselves as an attraction we could always return if we did not care to accept the salary or working conditions American managers tried to impose on us. It would be our ace in the hole. But Pop would not listen.

"I'm homesick." said my Pop who had had no home for over twenty years.

Pop did not mention in his long letter to Variety one of the reasons for taking the family to England in the first place. A short while before, thanks to the indefatigable Gerry Society, we had been barred for two years from playing the New York theaters. The irony of this was that the do-gooders got us in the end, because we'd played a benefit show for a charity. The manager of the Grand Opera House in Manhattan had asked Pop to put on the act with all five Keatons appearing.

Pop agreed on condition that the manager guaranteed that we would have no trouble with the Gerry Society. The manager gave the guarantee, but we were served with a summons just the same. Still counting on the managers word, Pop did not even bother to bring a lawyer with him when he appeared in court and explained about the manager promising to assume responsibility.

However, the manager double-crossed him by taking the stand and denying he had made any such promise to Pop. We were fined \$250 and The Three Keatons were banned from the New York stage. The ban remained in force for two years and was a cruel setback for our act because it kept us off the stage of Hammerstein's Victoria along with New York's other vaudeville houses.

By that time Hammerstein's Victoria had long been recognized as America's greatest vaudeville theater. The grand old showcase, located at 42nd Street and Broadway where the Rialto Theater now stands [1960], was in its day everything- and perhaps a little more- than the Palace became later. As any old-timer will tell you, Hammerstein's Victoria was vaudeville at its all-time best. I suppose the greatest compliment we Keatons were ever paid was being booked there four to six times each season. Most acts were happy when they got one date a year there. Favored acts usually got two.

The original Oscar Hammerstein built the Victoria, but it was run by his son Willie, a master showman and the father of Oscar II, the creator, with Richard Rodgers, of 'Oklahoma!', 'South Pacific', and a few other theatrical tidbits.

Willie Hammerstein would try anything- and did. Willie revelled in such capers as booking Paul Swan, the classical dancer, and advertising him as 'the world's most beautiful man' and giving a big publicity build-up to something he called 'a wrestling cheese'. This stood seven feet high, was two feet broad, and no human wrestling champion could make it stay on the floor. The indomitable cheese of course, was so heavily weighted at the bottom that it righted itself automatically.

Willie also filled his big playhouse with other freak attractions. When Ethel Conrad and Lillian Graham were arrested for shooting W.E.D. Stokes, a millionaire hotel owner and prominent social figure, Willie bailed them out and put them on as

'The Shooting Stars'. He also booked Nan Patterson, the Floradora girl, who was acquitted of murdering her lover, Caesar Young.³⁷ He could even fatten the box office with the Cherry Sisters, who were so bad that a screen had to be put up in front of them to intercept the vegetables and rotten eggs audiences bombarded them with. And Willie Hammerstein, knowing showman that he was, increased the fun of his customers by having his ushers pass out artificial fruit and vegetables to those who had not brought any with them.

Vaudeville is variety entertainment, and Willie tried to give his customers everything in the world that could possibly amuse, charm, bewilder, baffle, amaze, or enchant them. And I do mean everything. From 'Sober Sue, the girl who never laughed' to 'Don, the talking Dog', fire-eaters, jugglers, clowns, men who could add and subtract backward, horses that could count, melodramas, comedies, high divers, and ice skating and bicycle-riding basketball teams.

Besides the prestige of appearing so often in American vaudeville's most esteemed showcase, Hammerstein's was the most fun to play. This was because it attracted the most show-wise crowd in the country, for other performers attended in droves. And there is no applause so sweet to hear as that which comes from other actors. They really know whether you are any good or not, whether the entertainment you are selling is the real thing or phony.

Nobody who saw one matinee we played at Hammerstein's ever forgot it. Pop stayed that day at Dowling's bar just down the street several minutes too long. On looking at his watch, he slapped his head and ran for the stage door. In his hurry he forgot to put on the felt pad he had been wearing under his trousers ever since I had got strong enough to hurt him when we did our anvil-chorus work on each other with the brooms. His own right arm, by the way, had swelled to twice normal size because of the years he'd been throwing his growing boy around the stage.

That afternoon, as usual, we were working before an audience that had seen our act so often they knew the routines as well as we did. The first time I whacked Pop good that afternoon the broomstick made a different sound than the usual muffled one. Pop turned green with pain and jumped about three feet in the air.

"Christ," he groaned, "I left the pad off!"

I have mentioned, I think, that as far as my father was concerned there was no such thing as a stage whisper. But the whole house roared and rocked as they heard him say the word that was still forbidden and would have shocked a less worldly crowd.

"Are you going through with it?" he asked.

"Sure," I said as he winced, "it's part of the play." I socked him again.

"Going through with it?" he asked once more.

"Yes." I said. This time he gave me an appealing look, and remarked,

"But remember I'm your father."

And Pop did go through with it, although I showed him no mercy. At the end of the act Joe Keaton, black and blue, made one of his best ad libs. Stepping to the footlights, he told the audience, in one of his confidential stage whispers,

"This is the last time I let George M. Cohan write anything for me."

I always liked performing. But it was hard work, and there were occasions when it was not exactly fun.

³⁷[In 1904 3 trials ended in a mistrial and 2 deadlocked juries, and so all charges were dropped. General opinion is that, though guilty, the men on the juries felt she was too pretty to hang. Nan then took leading roles in various musicals, but had no talent and so lapsed back into obscurity.]

There was, for example, the Monday matinee we had to stretch out our seventeen-minute act for more than an hour and a half while waiting for the act scheduled to follow us to assemble its equipment backstage.

That equipment was something to put together, for the act was the daredevil turn called 'Dr. Clark's Globe of Death'. This was an immense sphere made of crisscross strips of steel placed inches apart from one another. A motorcyclist got inside this, started riding slowly around the lower part of it, increasing his speed as he made the roaring motorcycle travel higher and higher around the sides. The climax of the act came when he started doing loop the loops, riding upside down, inside the big globe.

We were already on stage that Monday afternoon when the house manager signalled us to keep going as long as possible. Dr. Clark's massive equipment, it appeared, had not even arrived at the theater. When it did it would take quite a long time to set up and bolt together.

Pop stepped up to the footlights.

"The next act is a great act," he said, "but it takes a long time to assemble. So if any of you want to go home and wash those dishes you left in the sink, we'll understand."

Nobody left.

After we finished all our routines, Pop said,

"Buster, recite something." I recited *The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck*.

"Recite something else." Pop said.

I did. When he asked for a third bit of elocution I told him,

"I've run out of recitations. I do know a parody, but it doesn't belong to me. It belongs to Hoey and Lee, and we have to get their permission before I can sing it."

"They'll not sue you or kill you either if you send them royalties." said Joe. "I give you permission. I'll take the responsibility."

All very cute, and I sang the song. But how long can you keep on being cute on the stage? After a while the house manager signaled us that the sections of the Globe of Death had at last arrived. We could hear the stage crew starting to assemble it backstage. But that would take a good deal of time. When we couldn't think of one more thing to do, Pop Yelled,

"Pull up the curtain."

Back there they were still trying to put the Globe of Death together. Pop and I went to work with a ready will, helping the crew but really hampering them by getting our pants and other bits of clothing riveted to the big globe. Despite our assistance, they finally put together the thing, which was propped up on all sides by steel girders.

By that time we had been on the stage for an hour and thirty-five minutes. It was the one time that I wished I was Al Jolson who could hold any audience spellbound for hours whenever he felt like it.

An even tougher assignment came one night when we had to compete with a freshly killed corpse. This also happened at the Grand Theater in Pittsburgh where Pop and I had staged our biggest fight and watched *l'affaire* itching powder. This time Ethel Levey, recently divorced from George M. Cohan, was the headliner. She went on just before us. In the middle of her second song a maniac in a box stood up, drew a revolver and pointed it at her. When she ran screaming off the stage the man turned the gun on himself and blew his brains out. He had not even known Ethel Levey.

Though still half hysterical, Miss Levey was coaxed into coming back to finish her act. Then The Three Keatons went on and did their hilarious act.

P.S. The corpse won.

Oddly enough, the clowning of other acts gave us other very tense moments on the stage. None of this was ill-intentioned. It was natural for them to do everything they could think of to throw into a panic any act like ours which prided itself on being impossible to upset.

Those practical jokes that went on and on like movie serials. Like the trunkful of cats. Why did I ever start that?

A hundred cats lived in that theater in Buffalo, barely holding their own against the rats. One morning, with the assistance of several small boys, I collected eighteen cats. These we brought to the theater's prop room, and I filled the prop trunk that the Leightons used in their act with assorted cats. Not wishing to be too rough on the cats I drilled airholes in the sides of the trunk. Nice and dark and cozy, so they all go to sleep.

In their act, one of the Leightons, (who did a song, dance, and comedy turn), told another, playing a Negro bellhop,

"Boy, open my trunk and get out my parade suit!"

That afternoon when the trunk was opened onstage the cats, snarling with rage and terror, fly out all over the Leightons. Cats streaked in every direction. They ran into the wings, climbed up into the scenery, and disappeared into the flies. Others jumped into the boxes and ran up the orchestra aisles, even out into the audience. Pandemonium, needless to say, was the rule for quite a while at that performance. "If I know the Three Leightons," said Joe, "just look out."

We met the Leightons in nearly every theater, but nothing happened. "I like it less and less," said Joe. "I know those boys."

Then I found that knothole in that floor in Columbus. I stopped and looked at it with that alley broom in my hand and walked away. Walked back and looked at it again, jabbed at it with the broom handle and missed. Gave up and walked away again.

Just then Joe started reciting his 'beautiful poem', and needed a noise obbligato.

So I walk over and really go to work on it. Jab and miss, jab and miss. Get into every crazy position - even on my head - to aim better, but still miss. Sounded like the Light Brigade, a terrible racket. No one could hear a word Joe was saying. I continued slamming the broom on the floor. He picked up the gag, stopping and starting over, doing the slow burn.³⁸

Then he begins to really wonder, 'What the hell is that over there?' walks over, and I point at the hole as serious as if God only knows what's down in there.

I keep missing. So I get sore, take off my coat, roll up my sleeves, spit on my palms, take the broom in both hands, sight down the handle, take aim - Joe bending over watching me - shake my head, line it up again, take a fresh aim. More of a production, for Chrissake, than Palmer lining up a thirty-foot putt. Finally I let fly. Hit the hole at last; the broom goes in up to the bristles. This upended me, and I go smack on my face with my feet up in the air, making another terrible noise. A beautiful fall. After all that buildup the audience is absolutely killing itself. All over a hole in the floor!

But I know what Joe has in mind.

'All right, son,' he's thinking, 'now what do you do for a topper?'

Okay, Joe, here it is. Pretend the broom is stuck. Can't get the damned thing out. Pull and yank and tug - no soap. Joe plays along, getting the drift, steps back, scratched that bald wig, then grabs me from behind around the waist like a tug-of-war

³⁸[The 'slow burn', simulating anger on a steadily rising scale.]

at the Hibernians' picnic, and we give it all we got - the ad-lib drummer down in the pit building it up with snare rolls.

Back and forth. We gain a few inches, can't hold it, and the broom gains it back. Back and forth, back and forth, then I whisper, "Now!"

Out comes the broom and down we go - a clubhouse-sandwich pratfall - drummer smashing the cymbals and the house going crazy. Pop would then throw the broom away and calmly continue his recitation just where he'd left off. That was supposed to be the end of the routine.

I remember asking Joe later, "How did that simple gag get such a laugh?" And Joe replying, "If you think that was simple, you're simple. It's not what you do but how you do it." Most of the capers were inspired by this one routine.

So now every theater we go to we have a knothole drilled in the stage. But the Katzenjammer spirit of the other acts on the bill inspired them to contribute new plot turns and complications.³⁹ That's where the Leightons finally came in.

When we were playing Keith's Colonial Threater in New York, a couple of those fellows sneaked down to the basement under the stage and waited until the broom got stuck. Then they tied the end of a ball of string onto the tip of the handle. We hauled up miles of string.

The Leightons held on. Next time it was rope tied to the handle, two whole theatrical 'long lines,' a hundred and sixty feet. We hauled it up fathom by fathom while the orchestra segued into 'The Sailors Hornpipe.'

When Pop and I, singing 'The Volga Boat Song', complete with gestures, eventually got all the rope up through the hole, a dinky little American flag was tied to the end of it, and the orchestra immediately swung into 'Stars and Stripes Forever.' Who cued them? The Leightons.

We were relieved when we finished that week at the Colonial. I began to sense trouble. I spoke to Joe.

"You turned 'em on, boy," he said, "but you can't turn 'em off."

"Let's drop the knothole gag."

"Drop it, my ass," said Joe. "We stick. Let's see what they do next."

We saw. Word had got around, and new crazy tricks awaited us in the other theaters.

The next week they put a ladder under the hole. When the broomstick went down they were on the ladder and quickly covered the handle with fresh mustard. Joe wasn't easy to faze. He wiped his hands off on me - who else? - and ad-libbed, "They've got everything on this broom handle, including our two weeks' notice."

At the next theater we played, two guys hung onto the broomstick while Pop tugged away like mad. They let go suddenly, and Pop went about three feet in the air as it came up.

At still another show they took the trouble to put a huge slingshot below the hole. When they let this go the broom shot away into the flies. It traveled so fast that Pop didn't even see it rocket past him. He saw it come down though a few minutes later. We were arguing, as part of the act, with our angry faces very close together when the broom whizzed down between our noses at terrific speed. It came down stick

³⁹[The Katzenjammer Kids were two anarchic and anti-social juvenile pranksters in a comic strip so famous that the word entered the language, meaning wild and crazy, and then some.]

first, of course, like an arrow. Neither of us would have needed to fake a fall if it had hit.

Next time out it's a live eel at the end of the string. We were playing Keith's Alhambra, also on Upper Broadway, when the other acts went down to the Battery and got an eel several feet long from the Aquarium. This they brought up to the theater on the subway in a five-gallon can filled with water. When this came up on the end of the rope, Joe Keaton turned green under his make-up. Joe had bourbon stashed in his trunk, and he honestly thought he had snakes. The eel wriggled away across the stage with the broom still tied to it.

So the Leighton Brothers got us very nervous when they kept threatening to tie a German flag to our broom. Naturally we pretended to take this as a joke, but each time Pop pulled up the broom I tried to peer down the hole to see if a flag was on it. One day I did see a flag fluttering on the end of the broom.

It was at Shea's Theater in Toronto. It was 1915, the second year of World War I, and all Canada was in mourning for its crack regiment, The Princess Pats, which recently had been all but exterminated at Ypres. The trick The Three Leightons played on us easily might have had tragic results.

We yank the broom out, start to haul up the rope, and one of the Leightons hisses from the wings,

"There's a German flag on the end of the rope." As it came up, I slashed away at the string. In my haste, I missed the string and hit the broom which broke in two. My knees grew weak.

"Let's drop it." I whisper.

But Joe's jaw is out a mile. It's haul away, boys.

I'm thinking fast. Get down on my knees. Wait. Here comes the flag. Stamp on it. Spit on it. Desecrate it as no flag was ever desecrated. Now hold it up for everybody to see- the enemy flag! And good night! It turned out to be the Union Jack that I had slammed away at.

'Holy Christ, look at it! The Union Jack! ' We had just dishonored the British flag.

The silence sounded like thunder out of China 'cross the bay.

"Get off the stage- fast." and Joe's already on his way.

Pop and I raced for the wings, he going one way, I the other. The moment we were out of sight we stopped to listen, half expecting to hear the people roaring and hissing. I can still hear that sound. Fifteen hundred people all drawing in their breaths together. And then more silence for a little while- like a hundred years. And then it comes. They're laughing! Pop and I looked at one another across the empty stage. Then we stuck out our heads. The people were still laughing, so we courageously rushed out to take our bow. My guess is that the audience realized when they saw our horrified faces that we were just as surprised as they were when the flag came up, and that I had swung at it before recognizing it. The old shock laugh.

So Joe went to the Leightons.

"Drop it guys." he said. "We're square." It was Lee at Appomattox.⁴⁰

"Not scared, are you?" asked one.

"Scared as hell, and you damn well know it. Next time we'd be hanging by our necks up with the scenery."

Now all of this clowning and teasing and horsing around, I repeat, was done utterly without malice.

⁴⁰[Appomattox, (pronounced apper-mattocks) 18 miles East of Lynchburg, Penn. On April 9, 1865 it was the site of General Robert E. Lee's surrender, which ended The American Civil War.]

It seems to me that actors, generally speaking, were then far less sensitive to being kidded than today's stars are.

It must have been soon after that that the act began to change. In one way it had to, of course. I'd got too big for Joe to throw around. He was nearly fifty now; he could still kick, but his aim was off. Since he couldn't throw me any more, he began sliding me around on the floor. Like a human toboggan.

That's when I told a reporter that I'd given polish to the American stage.



CHAPTER EIGHT.

...a typical high-class audience...

1913>17. Smoking. Whiskey. Three a day. Breaks up act.

The next five years -what years! Sending the kids off to school one by one, Jingles to that Kalamazoo military academy and, later on, Louise to a Muskegon school. That brought the three of us back together again - the original three who went through all the hard times together. Success, sure. Money, sure. But this was the old times.

The act had to change. But Joe was changing too. Not like the old man any more. Mad most of the time, and could look at you as if he didn't know you. But he could become the father quick enough- those lickings onstage for things that had happened before. In front of a thousand people. Finally I'd get sore, and we'd start trading. And still keep it funny.

Funny? People should have felt the wallops we were handing out.

And Pop was always there with the right line. Once when an audience was slow to laugh Pop told them in a sad tone,

"You're not taking this production seriously enough. It is every bit as important as Ben-Hur ever thought of being."

These ad libs were best appreciated, of course, at Hammerstein's. I often think of how ecstatically that sophisticated Broadway crowd would have greeted the wildest fight Pop and I ever put on in public. This took place at the Grand Theater in Pittsburgh, the same theater where Fritzi Scheff was introduced to itching powder. The fight was over my smoking. I was seventeen, but like most of the fathers of that era Pop believed that smoking stunted a youth's growth and should not be indulged in until one was twenty-one.

Pop and Mom both smoked themselves. Pop always rolled his own cigarettes out of Bull Durham tobacco. He kept the little white bag Bull Durham came in and the packet of brown cigarette papers attached to it in the right hand pocket of his jacket.

On that particular day, Pop and I were wearing blue serge suits which we had hung next to each other in the dressing-room closet. While we were making up he went to get some tobacco from his pocket and by mistake fumbled for it in the pocket of my jacket. In my make-up mirror I saw him come up with the bulldog pipe I had bought myself a few days before. He studied the pipe for a moment, and put it back into my pocket. He got his tobacco and cigarette papers from his own suit, rolled one for himself and smoked it while he finished putting on his make-up, without saying anything to me about the pipe.

When the call came for us to get on stage, I let Pop leave first. He stalked out, then I told Bernard Granville,

"I'm in for it tonight, Bunny. If you want some excitement, just watch from the wings. Now I'll catch it."

I was in for it but so was my old man. Our routine now had me hitting him as often and as hard as he hit me. I did not neglect my duties that day, particularly after he threw me around so hard that he knocked down the house set. This broke the batten. Pop also broke two kitchen chairs on me. I retaliated by breaking three brooms on him, and I knocked him over the footlights with the aid of my whirling basketball. We also dropped the kitchen table on one another. What a beating, and they always told me that my own mother began rolling her own at fifteen.

There was a typical high-class audience at the Grand that afternoon, and they enjoyed it with the uninhibited abandon of orphans turned loose in an ice-cream plant.

After we staggered back to the dressing room, Pop got my bulldog pipe and smoking tobacco from my suit and slapped them on the table. It was his way of acknowledging that I had won his permission to smoke in his presence or behind his back.

But when he found the cigarettes, the tune was
"A man smokes a pipe."

That afternoon it took two doctors and two masseurs to get us back into good enough shape to work the evening performance.

Myra told me,
"Joe's not punishing you." I said,
"It feels like it."

"No, he's not mad at you or anyone else. It's old Father Time he'd like to get his hands on. Man or woman," she said, "some can take getting old, some can't."

It made it more understandable, no more standable. Anyway, like the Indian said, "It went on like that for a while, then it got worse."⁴¹ Yet you have to say, 'Poor son of a bitch, fighting something he'd never catch up with!'

But, sweet Jesus, our act! What a beautiful thing it had been. That beautiful timing we had- beautiful to see, beautiful to do. The sound of the laughs, solid, right where you knew they would be.....

But look what happened- standing up and bopping each other like a cheap film. It couldn't last that way. Every time he got a snootful he'd sound off about Martin Beck. No matter who- agents, theater managers, anybody- tell 'em what he's gonna do to Beck. With his mind on Beck he'd come on the stage wild.

I have often wondered what Pop would have done if he had learned that same year that I had taken my first drink of whiskey. That had happened during our summer vacation at Muskegon. Even as a babe-in-arms I had been given sips of beer. Most people in those days thought of beer as a health drink, something between a tonic and a medicine. They even endowed it with an integrity all its own, spoke of the 'honest glass of beer'. But whiskey was different. Whiskey, as the ministers and newspaper editorials told us, was pure evil, apparently being distilled in hell itself.

That first drink of mine was taken with a Bluffton pal, Lex Neal, who was nineteen, two years older than I. He later became a song writer, and a gag man for me. He had just been given the brushoff by the town beauty, an indignity that angered me more than it did Lex himself. But I no longer remember her name. All I now recall about her is that she was the daughter of the Commissioner of the Muskegon County Water Works.
"I'll prove I am your true friend," I told him, "by not letting you get soused alone. I'll get drunk too."

It seemed a perfect day for it. In addition to Lex's love tragedy, our baseball team had just lost another game.

Neither Lex nor myself had the nerve to ask for a bottle of whiskey at the one place in Bluffton you could, Pasco's Tavern. We asked Mr. Feeney, who ran a tourist camp, to buy it for us, which he did. The errand entailed a little difficulty as his camp- really a few shacks and tents for campers and picnickers- was situated on a bluff about ninety

⁴¹ [I have failed to track this down, which is annoying as I know I have read it in the dim distant past. As I recall, the indian in question was relating how they got herded onto a desert reservation with a drought in full swing, no game, and various other horrors; most of the tribe died, and 'it went on like that for a while and then it got worse.' I make no claim for the accuracy of the above. It was tolerably famous, and certainly Buster would have expected everyone to know the story thus obliquely referred to.][Best candidate so far is Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce indians...still checking.]

feet high. You could only get to and from Feeney's camp by climbing a rickety wooden ladder. When the obliging Mr. Feeney came back with the whiskey that afternoon, Lex and I drank the bottle between us while exchanging philosophical reflections on the perfidious nature of women. We also promised each other never to marry, no matter how beautiful the girls were who attempted to trap us. When darkness fell I was blotto. But Lex, having had some previous experience, was in somewhat better shape.

He did his best to help me down Feeney's rickety ladder. But it was a moonless night, and before I took more than a step or two I fell to the bottom- without being hurt though, as the sand there was very soft and covered by thick clumps of grass. But my fall awoke Lex to the fact that I was in no shape to go home. Instead he took me to his own house where his mother, a frail old Southern woman who smoked a corncob pipe, put me to bed and nursed me through my terrible hang-over the next morning. After that experience I never took another drink of whiskey until I became a soldier in World War I, [five] years later.

[On page 37-8 Buster was talking about the effects of the Klaw Erlanger defection.]

Unable to ban all of the deserters, many well-known acts, including ours, were forgiven- for the time being.

With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 all foreign acts who could reach the United States rushed here. They were promptly put to work, replacing as many of the 'disloyal' American acts as possible.

To teach those once rebellious acts that they were using who was boss, the vaudeville magnates UBO agency harassed them in every way they could think of. They laid out routes so these acts could not make the trip from one city to another overnight. This forced the performers to lay off a whole week between bookings which cut down their income considerably. There would be endless arguments about material used. The worst insult to a well-known act like ours was making it open a show. This meant going on before the audience was warmed up and while some of the people out front were still being seated.

This is what Martin Beck did to The Three Keatons in 1916 when we played the New York Palace which by then had replaced Hammerstein's Victoria as vaudeville's most important showcase.

Pop could not stop talking about this outrage. He called Beck every name in the book.

The next day Martin Beck gave orders that the running time of our act must be cut from seventeen minutes to twelve. Nobody, of course, knew better than he did how difficult it is for a knockabout, harum-scarum act like ours to eliminate five minutes overnight from its running time.

We did not try.

Instead, Pop brought a dollar alarm clock out on the Palace stage as we began our turn. While winding it up and setting the alarm he explained to the audience that, to our regret, the management would not allow us to do our full act. Nevertheless we would do everything we could in the short time we were permitted to remain on the stage. He put the clock down in front of the footlights. The instant the alarm rang we stopped what we were doing. It did not matter whether we were fighting, chasing one another, or dancing. We just stopped dead in the middle of it, Pop picked up the clock, and we walked off.

It was a wonderful way to express our resentment. The audiences were with us one hundred per cent. The trouble was the audiences did not book the acts.

We ended that season playing two weeks in the Loew Theaters. That was the small-time even though Loew paid us \$750 a week, the same salary we got from Keith. The small-time meant three shows a day instead of two. For a standard act like ours

which had never played anything but the big-time it also meant great loss of prestige. The entire profession assumed you were on your way down- and maybe out- if you accepted small-time booking.

Right then and there it would have meant everything if we had established ourselves in England and could have gone back there to work. Rather than play the small-time, other big-time acts preferred not to work at all. We were not that stubborn or foolish. We had seen some of them sit and wait years until something they considered worthy of them came along. For most this chance never came, and after a while they were forgotten.

We agreed among ourselves not to let that happen to us. When the next season came and we could get no big-time bookings we signed a contract to play the Pantages Circuit on the West Coast. But we soon found out that playing our roughhouse, neck-breaking act three times a day was too punishing and bruising.

We begged Alexander Pantages to let us do only two shows. Pantages was a tough old Greek who had started his money-making career as a saloon porter in the Klondike gold rush. His experiences in the Frozen North had not made him benevolent.

"You signed to do three shows a day," he told us, "and that's what you'll do."

Adding to the difficulties of playing three shows a day was the fact that Pop had recently switched from drinking beer to hard liquor. Being forced to play the small-time gave him an additional excuse for boozing it up. When I smelled whiskey across the stage, I got braced.

In an act like ours precise timing, of course, was all important. Being a half second off in throwing a kick or ducking a punch meant broken bones sooner or later. Pop never did become one of those falling-down drunks. But he didn't need to be to endanger the health of both of us.

"Oh, I am all right," he would say when I mentioned this, "and don't forget, I'm your father, so don't lecture me." I tried roughing him up during the act, punishing him a little, but that didn't work either. He laughed at me when I threatened to go it alone unless he got off the sauce.

That's when I had fasten a rope to that old basketball of mine and keep swinging it around like a hammer thrower to keep him off me. Get him running, let out the rope a little, and bop him on the fanny. There were times it was him or me, but we had to keep it funny- me on the old table like a ringmaster:

"Hup, Prince! Hup, Prancer!" Audience laughing like hell and my dad falling on his face. But still the showman, drunk or sober. He'd get up off the floor, his wind all gone, and stumble to the footlights for an ad lib:

"This is the last skit George M. Cohan will ever write for me." or

"If we can get Nazimova, we're going to put out a number-two company."

You could feel it in the air- we were overdue to meet up with Martin Beck. But that tightwad manager in Providence came first. Of course, he should have furnished us strong kitchen chairs, not old ones that broke when you stepped on them. And he shouldn't have charged us for them when they broke, much less the price of new chairs. But neither should Joe have gone nuts that closing night, when he saw the deduction, and smashed up all that furniture backstage. That gold French sofa! Boy! Did the news get to New York fast!

That was 1915. From Providence we went straight to New York, and Martin Beck laying for us. One matinee at the Palace, when we were on, Pop looked out into the wings and saw his enemy, arms folded, glaring at him, and whispering just loud enough for Joe to hear,

"Okay, Keaton, make me laugh!" Pop's face turned purple. He snapped,

"I'll make you laugh, Martin Beck, you low-down, no-good bastard."

The next thing I knew he was streaking toward Beck, who turned and ran out the stage door. The stagehands tried to grab Pop and slowed him down a few seconds, but Pop wasn't satisfied with chasing the two-a-day tycoon out of his own theater. He followed the panting Mr. Beck- who was about five feet eight and chunky- up Forty-seventh Street and down Sixth Avenue, only stopping when he lost his man in the crowds. It was a good thing. He'd have killed him for sure.

As it was, he only killed the Three Keatons. We'd been sick; now we were dead.

Meanwhile left alone on the stage, I didn't know what to do. I sang a song, recited, jiggled until Pop came back and we were able to go into our regular routine. At the finish we got our usual applause.

Even Martin Beck didn't dare to throw so well-known an act out of vaudeville entirely. But it was the Western Orpheum three-a-day for us, out to the sticks- and for keeps this time. That was the last week The Three Keatons ever played big-time vaudeville in New York- or anywhere else. We were through with the big-time forever.

Three-a-day with such a tough act wore Joe and Myra out, and got me down too- the bruises never got a chance to heal. And now Joe was so sore it was eating him up. "You think I've been drinking? Watch me now."

It was in San Francisco that he got tipsy once too often. We were scheduled to open at the Pantages Theater in Los Angeles on the following Monday. But during the week in San Francisco I told Mom,

"I'm going to break up the act."

Mom made no objection. She herself had tried to talk to Pop out of drinking before shows. Anyway, the act had never meant to her what it did to us.

Finally- it was in February, 1917- Myra decided to call it quits. Joe was abusing her too. We were on the train from Oakland to Los Angeles when she said to me, "Buster, God help me, I can't take any more."⁴²

I don't know how we lasted as long as we did.

But neither of us could figure out an easy way to tell Pop the bad news. He would break down and cry like a baby, plead for another chance. I was not prepared to watch my father go to pieces. I was not sure I could go through with it. Not that I wasn't damn mad at him.

So Mom and I just did not tell him.

While he was out at some saloon on the night we were scheduled to move on to Los Angeles, we packed our things and took a train East. When we got to L.A.. we swiped our trunks out of the alley back of the theater, gave the manager some money for Joe, and ran. As we say in the theater, we left Joe with egg on his face. We didn't even leave him a note. I still can hardly believe we did it. Except for Myra, I guess I'd have gone on taking it.

I took the train to New York to see if I could get work there on my own. As a single act. That's what vaudeville people called it. Mom went to Detroit to visit some friends for a while.

When Pop got back to our hotel and found us gone, he was not worried. Always the optimist, he assumed that we had gone on to Los Angeles without him. It was only when he walked into the Pantages Theater in L.A.. that he learned I had cancelled the rest of our tour. No one could tell him where we were. Not knowing what else to do he went to Muskegon, hoping to find us there. And that's where he spent the rest of that winter.

⁴²[Note there are two different versions contained here. I suspect that the one where Buster takes responsibility predates Joe's death, thus protecting Myra. However this is pure supposition.]

Our place was a summer cottage and had no furnace or plumbing. But aside from the physical discomfort it wasn't a bad place for Pop. Some of his old vaudeville pals had retired and were living there the year round. The kids were still in private school nearby which meant he had half of his family close by. There was enough money in the bank account. Pop wasn't going to die in Muskegon of either hunger or loneliness.

Knowing him, I was sure he wouldn't die of remorse either.

Meanwhile I had gone into movies in New York.

After staying a month in Detroit, Mom took pity on Pop and rejoined him in Muskegon. It would have been something to have seen his face when Mom explained to him what I was doing. Pop had always sneered at the movies. He considered them a passing fad, no more important than the peekaboo waist, let us say, and far less interesting.

Not too long before, William Randolph Hearst, already dabbling in the business of picturemaking, suggested to Pop that we make a two-reeler comedy for him.

"What are you saying?" thundered Pop. "You want to show The Three Keatons on a bed sheet for ten cents?"

Later on, Hearst offered us a contract to make a whole series of two-reel comedies based on 'Bringing up Father', the comic strip which his newspapers ran. Pop, Hearst said, could play Jiggs, the main character.⁴³ Pop again refused.

Like most middle-aged vaudeville actors he would have laughed if anyone had predicted that 'the flickers', as they were still called, would soon replace vaudeville as the country's favorite form of entertainment.⁴⁴



⁴³[As perfect a piece of casting as is reasonably imaginable. Jiggs is quite possibly based on Joe anyway, the resemblance is remarkable.]

⁴⁴[Joe's attitude was not that unreasonable... Samuel Goldwyn: "In the old vaudeville days what they used to do was buy a movie from us- like a two-reeler, sometimes a one-reeler- usually terrible, and at the end of the last vaudeville act, they would put this movie on. And the people hated it so much they would leave the theater. That's why they got to call them 'chasers'." this prevented people staying through more than one show for one show price. Recounted by Garson Kanin.]



CHAPTER NINE.

One way to get into the movies..

1917. Arbuckle. Butcher Boy. Talmadges.

In the spring of 1917 when I was twenty-one, vaudeville wasn't quite as good as it used to be. I decided to try another branch of show business.

On reaching New York in February 1917,⁴⁵ I went straight to the private office of Max Hart, agent for The Three Keatons and New York's most influential theater agent.

"What do you want to do with me?"

"Where are Joe and Myra?"

"I want to work alone."

"What's wrong?"

"We broke up the act."

"Are you of age?"

"Since last October."

"Okay, come with me. I'll get you all the work you want. I'm going to get you in 'The Passing Show'." Hart told me.

He immediately put on his hat and took me to the Shubert Brothers' office which was just down the street. They were casting the new edition of their annual revue, 'The Passing Show of 1917', which was then one of the best showcases for actors on Broadway.

Mr. Hart, an agent of few words, took me straight into the private office of J.J. Shubert. As always J.J. was doing the casting with the assistance of a flabby, lisping gentleman everybody called 'Mother' Simmons.

"This is Buster Keaton." Max Hart told them. "Put him in your show."

J.J. Shubert looked me over, and asked,

"Can you sing?"

"Sure I can sing." I said, even though it was a pretty foolish question. If Mr. Shubert hired me it would be for my comedy. And he did hire me, signed me at The Winter Garden, without asking me to sing, or a second question.

'The Passing Show' always started in the summer and usually played the Winter Garden in New York, which was the Shubert's Theater, for six months, and then went on the road for about a year and a half. It was one of the biggest shows in New York, equally as big as Ziegfeld's Follies. The Winter Garden was Al's home, and the show I was supposed to go in would have starred the Howard Brothers. But anyhow, they signed me for that show, and my salary was set at \$250 a week for New York and \$300 on tour.

A few days later I got a script of the revue. It meant a good deal to me, for it was not only the first thing on my own, but it was a chance to do something really different.

I had about ten days to wait for rehearsals to be called and I was walking down Broadway- down along Eighth or some place- and I ran into Lou Anger, an old vaudevillian, a Dutch comedian, who had worked on vaudeville bills with us many times.

He had met Arbuckle socially when he and his family were still working in vaudeville. Buster always said that he met Arbuckle on the street, period.

Maybe Anger was with him?

⁴⁵[Two months before America finally declared war on Germany in WW1. On April 2 the president called for it, and it was passed with unusual promptness on April 6, 1917.]

Could be, but Buster never mentioned his name, so he didn't think Lou Anger was important, he was just somebody with Arbuckle. Anyway, he never mentioned it.⁴⁶

'Someone called his name. Buster looked up. It was Lou Anger, an old vaudeville friend of the Keatons. He had been a 'Dutch' comedian, a la Weber and Fields, and his wife, Sophye Bernard, the original 'Poor Butterfly Girl', was presently starring at the Hippodrome on Sixth Avenue.

"I'm heading for Norma Talmadge's studio." Anger said. "Come along. just a few blocks over on Forty-eighth."

Buster hesitated, then fell in step. As they walked Anger explained that he was now managing the Joseph M. Schenck film enterprises, which included separate producing companies for the famous Talmadge sisters, Norma and Constance. Although many movie companies were already moving to Hollywood, said Anger, Schenck preferred to operate in New York.

"You've never been in the movies, have you?" Anger asked.

"No, Joe got mad at them." Buster told Anger of the 'Bringing Up Father' offer that William Randolph Hearst had made and how Joe had received it.

"Too bad." Anger observed. "You'd be in the big money now."

Buster, however, now tended to agree with Joe's decision. In his book, musical comedy rated way above motion pictures. He was not a confirmed moviegoer. To him they seemed secondhand and derivative- a painting versus the real scene. He said so to Anger, who objected strongly.

I'd been watching motion pictures when I was touring the country. I liked to watch the movies there, but I wasn't impressed with motion pictures until Sennett hit his stride with the Keystone Cops, and then I saw 'The Birth of A Nation' (1915). From then on I was sold, I was a picture fan. Then of course the next feature that caught my eye was Sennett's 'Tillie's punctured Romance' (1914). Griffith's 'Intolerance' (1916) was terrific, it's a beautiful production. That was somethin' to watch then. You weren't used to seein' big spectacles like that.

Buster defended his thesis.

"I got mad at the movies myself." he said. "Remember when they turned our pet theater, the Victoria, into a movie house and renamed it the Rialto? Joe and I went there once. And what did we see? Two of the gags we invented. Who did our 'Anvil

⁴⁶[Kevin Brownlow: 'Note. Keaton told me a slightly different story from the version in Rudi Blesh's book. He said that he met both Anger and Arbuckle on the street, and that Arbuckle invited him over to the studio. I checked with Rudi Blesh, who pointed out that most of his interviews were secured during 1952-1953.

"If I were choosing," he said, "I'd take the earlier story, which he told me when he was still in his fifties and his memory was very clear." In deference to the authenticity of the Keaton book, I have altered this story to correspond with that of Blesh. All other material remains as Keaton described it.' The Parades Gone By. P.478.

I have found no evidence of any failure of Buster's memory with age, indeed, there is a greater frankness as he approaches 70. Furthermore I don't believe the authenticity of Blesh's biography merits deference, certain parts are almost certainly inventions, and the overall tone is way out of line with reality.

Sadly however, no agreement can be reached on the meeting. Either he met Anger, then Arbuckle, or Anger and Arbuckle, or just Arbuckle. It is not even really important in fact. Therefore the meeting with Anger is presented in italics and readers must decide for themselves.]

Chorus'- the bop-trading routine? 'Fatty' Arbuckle and Al St. John. And who did my stunt of holding my own neck in the doorway- you know the one with the sleeve rolled up so the bare arm looked like someone else's trying to pull me through the door?"

"Sure." said Anger. "You used to call it The Hidden Adversary."

"Right." said Buster. "So who, of all people, do you imagine, was doing this gag?"

"I'll bite. Henry B. Walthall?" said Anger, referring to the star of 'The Birth of a Nation.'

"America's Sweetheart, Mary Pickford." Anger laughed.

"The Keatons," he said, "invented gags faster than anyone could copy them. But the movies are different. We used to hit each theater once a season. But try working up gags for a new two-reeler every six weeks."

Anger was with Roscoe ('Fatty') Arbuckle, the screen comedian, and he told me that he took his make-up off for awhile and was going to try running a motion picture company for Joe Schenck who was producing pictures with Norma Talmadge and Constance Talmadge at the Colony Studio on 48th Street in New York, and that he had just signed Arbuckle from Sennett.

As he introduced us, he explained that Arbuckle had just broken away from Mack Sennett, where he was used to making pictures in the Keystone fashion, to make two-reel comedies of his own. Joe Schenck was producing them, and Anger had quit vaudeville to be Joe's studio manager.

I had seen some of Arbuckle's work in Sennett comedies and greatly admired him. He said he'd caught our act many times and always liked it.

When I met Roscoe Arbuckle he says:

"Have you ever been in a motion picture, Buster?" And I said,

"I've never even been in a studio." Roscoe said,

"Well. I'm just startin' here for Joe Schenck. I've left Sennett, and Schenck's puttin' me up here to make pictures in the Norma Talmadge Studio." He says, "Why don't you come on down to the Colony Studios and play a scene with me and see how you like it? I'm starting a new picture tomorrow morning. You could try doing a bit in it. You might enjoy working in pictures." I wanted to see what it was like, so I told him,

"Well, rehearsals don't start for another week or so, I'd like to try it, so I'll be down."

The Colony Studios were housed in a big loft building on East Forty-eighth Street between Second and Third Avenues in New York. When I got there the whole place was humming with activity. Besides the Arbuckle company, Norma Talmadge's own company, her sister Constance's and a couple of others were making romantic dramas in other parts of the studio. This seemed wonderful to me. It was like being in a great entertainment factory where different shows were being manufactured at the same time.

Official census figures showed that in 1914 at least ten million people were going to the movies in the USA every day.

APRIL.⁴⁷ THE BUTCHER BOY.

The whole world was its stage.

The first time I ever walked in front of a motion picture camera was in The Butcher Boy, the two-reeler Roscoe was starting that day.

In those two-reelers, they didn't bother to give you any character or name or anything, things just started happening. Oh, there'd be a standard troupe. Your cast were always your leading lady, your villain, and you always carried a handful of bit people- they were cops or whatever you wanted them to be- you certainly had two or three in the scenario department helping you lay out pictures, you had a cutter, you had a camera man- two camera men. It's just done on a bigger scale today, that's all. I found everything about the new business exciting and fascinating.

There was no script. We simply talked over what we were going to do, and we got our ideas and went to work. He only had to turn me loose on the set and I had material in two minutes, because I'd been doing it all my life. It helped if you came from theater life into the movies.

Roscoe lost no time in putting me to work.

The scene was a country store, and Roscoe is weighing out sacks of flour when a yokel fight breaks out. He's to heave a sack at Al St. John and Al's to duck. This will let it arrive special delivery to the head of an innocent stranger who comes wandering in to buy some molasses. The innocent bystander, naturally, is me.

Roscoe had brown paper bags filled with about three pounds of flour, tied off tight so there was no air in the package, and ready for use.

"As you come in the store," he explained, "I will be throwing some of these bags and you will get one right in the face." It's to be a full-figure shot of me, and it's a six-foot throw. It seemed like nothing after all the punishment I'd been taking from Pop all of these years.

Arbuckle, wise head, said,

"Now, it is awfully hard not to flinch when you are expecting to get hit with something. So as you come in the door, look back. Look away from me, and when I say 'Turn!' you turn, and it will be there." It was.

We're set. He says,

"Turn!"

I turn and that sack exploded right smack in my face.

Arbuckle, who weighed 280 pounds,⁴⁸ was hard as a brick wall and fast on his feet.

No man that size ever took such falls. Arbuckle had a wonderful eye. He had established himself as a master custard-pie thrower while with Mack Sennett.

I found out that day that he could put his whole heart and every ounce of his weight into throwing a flour bag with devastating accuracy. How that man could throw! I can remember that blow now. I didn't have to throw that fall. It was the real thing. There was enough force in it to upend me completely. It put my feet where my head had been, and my neck and shoulders where my feet had been, with no co-operation from me whatever.⁴⁹ I did a real Immelman turn, and the sack was my motor.

Enough flour went up my nostrils and into my mouth to make one of mother's old-fashioned cakes. Because I was new to the business, I was politely picked up and

⁴⁷[All months referred to with film titles are release dates, until further notice. Therefore all stories under a film title precede that month.]

⁴⁸[Yallop quotes Arbuckle's weight at 266 pounds from his arrest sheet, and that is probably his top weight. Yallop also gives evidence to suggest that Arbuckle was much lighter than this at this time, due to illness only recently recovered from.]

⁴⁹[Examination of the film proves this startling assertion.]

dusted off. But it was fifteen minutes before I could breathe freely again, and it took twenty minutes to get the Pillsbury's Best out of my eyes and ears.

Incidentally, I've been told that my first scene in *The Butcher Boy* is still the only movie-comedy scene ever made with a new-comer that was photographed only once. In other words my film debut was made without a single retake.

Now, comes the tag. A month later the *Butcher Boy* is released at Loew's American down on Eighth Avenue. I don't tell anyone, but I'm personally far from sure that I'll do in the movies. So I buy a ticket, go in alone, and get an aisle seat.

Comes that scene; the sack is in the air; I half stand up in my excitement and suddenly- Pow- I- that's me myself, not me on the screen- I'm flat on my neck in the theater aisle. Now hear this: I got up and sat down in my seat again, honestly, without realizing what had happened. Then I heard Arbuckle laugh. The bastard had slipped in the theater and sat down behind me. He waited for that scene. At the very second that sack landed on the screen, he bopped me in the back of the neck. I was bruised a bit because I wasn't set for the fall, but it did one thing: it pounded it into my head that I would do in pix.

The plot called for me, after I was picked up and brushed off a bit, to buy a quarter's worth of molasses. I had brought along a tin pail for the molasses. But after I bought my molasses, and it was ladled out, I discovered that I had dropped my quarter in the bottom of the pail. Then followed a scene in which almost everybody in the store, Roscoe, Al St. John, and myself, all took turns trying to get the quarter. The three of us were smeared with molasses from head to foot before we were finished. I spilt molasses all over and I got my feet caught in it, and my hat fell into the pail. When I put my hat back on to leave and got the bucket of molasses, Roscoe tips his hat 'Good Day', [demonstrates] And my hat won't move.

As the scene did not seem to go right, it was taken several times.

That same day I was also called upon to be bitten by a dog. In that two-reeler I was hit with pies, covered with flour, and dropped in a barrel of molasses. Between one thing and another, I would say that my long career as a human mop proved most useful from the start of my work as a movie actor.

My first day in pictures, and it was for this that I gave up two hundred and ten dollars a week!*

I made my pan-shaped hat my signature from the first time I went out on my own as a comedian. In those days, almost every comedian you saw affected a derby hat. Even Harold Lloyd, when he was playing his Lonesome Luke character in 1917, wore a derby, which he later deserted for his signature straw hat and horn-rimmed glasses. So I decided to get a hat that was my very own. I knew straw was too fragile for my kind of antics, so I chose felt and designed this particular porkpie. I took a good stetson and cut it down, then I stiffened the brim with sugar water. My recipe calls for three heaping teaspoons of granulated sugar in a teacup of warm water. You wet the top and bottom of the brim, and then smooth it out on a clean hard surface and let it dry to a good stiffness. I did my earliest ones myself, always, and then I trained my wife [Eleanor]. Now she does them for me.

In the old days, the stetsons cost me \$3.50 each- I pay \$12.50 for the same one now. It gets to be expensive as I've used up thousands of them through the years. In the first place I used to do more water stuff, stunts where I got dumped into water, than most comedians. And felt disintegrates if you get it wet enough! So the mortality was high. I was lucky if I only used a half a dozen in each picture. Then people want them for souvenirs, they snatch them off my head, so I have to have extras on hand. Then, when I started making feature pictures, they showed them at the biggest city theaters, and

always had all the usherettes wearing my porkpie hats- somehow I never had one returned to me!

The *making* of a motion picture started to fascinate me immediately. The first thing I did in the studio was make a friend with the cameraman and ask a thousand questions about the camera. I had to find out how I get trick photography and things I could do with the camera that I couldn't do on the stage. Then I went into the projection room to see things cut. And I found out about the lenses and how to get it on the projector. I had to know how that film got put together in the cutting room, what you did to it in there, how you made things match; and how you finally got the picture together. This fascinated me- and the mechanics of the camera fascinated me the most. I tore a motion picture camera practically to pieces. Roscoe- none of us who knew him personally ever called him 'Fatty'- took the camera apart for me so I could understand how it worked and what it could do. And he taught me the cutting room also because he was his own cutter, he edited his own films. He showed me how film was developed, cut, then spliced together. I just watched Arbuckle do it, and that's all there was to it. I learned it all from him.

But the greatest thing to me about picturemaking was the way it automatically did away with the physical limitations of the theater. In the theater you had to create an illusion of being on a ship, a railroad engine, or an airplane. On the stage, one could show only so much. The camera had no such limitations. If you wanted cities, deserts, the Atlantic Ocean, Persia, or the Rocky Mountains for your scenery and background, you merely took your camera to them. The camera allowed you to show your audience the real thing: real trains, horses and wagons, snowstorms, floods. Nothing you could stand on, feel, or see was beyond the range of the camera. The whole world was its stage.

The same was true of the movie makers' use of light. They were making the sun work for them on their open stages on the roofs and in their studios which had large skylights. The sun gave them their back-lighting and cross-lights, and they increased this with reflectors. They had not yet learned to use mechanical light as effectively as they did a little later. In the theater *only* artificial lights could be used. These produced only effects, could only create and increase an illusion or highlight a particular spot on the stage. And this, everybody in pictures agreed, was merely the beginning!

Well, it's a fascinating business when you're as young as I was then.

At the studio I also met Arbuckle's producer, Joseph Schenck, who later became my brother-in-law. In 1917 the motion picture producers were hot after stage comedians. I did a few turns for Schenck and he wanted to know if I wanted to try the movies. I had no more idea than anyone else at the time what the growth of pictures was to be.

Gloria Swanson: Joseph Schenck, a squat, homely man who looked like a secondhand-furniture salesman and who had risen from the bottom of the movie business to marry Norma Talmadge and become head of UA, knew more about the underside of corporate success than I could learn in a lifetime. It was he who lent me his house on Long Island in 1923, through Allan Dwan, and every time we were together now I remembered a story Allan had told me then. Allan had directed Norma Talmadge in several pictures and had also introduced her to Joe Schenck when Schenck was in charge of booking pictures for Marcus Loew's theater chain. One morning Norma arrived late on the set, and because it was unlike her not to be prompt, Allan asked her if anything was the matter. Norma told him a terrible thing had happened to her on her way to work.

"I married Joe Schenck," she said.'

(Laughs) I never heard that. Probably because Peg pushed her to it.

Peg was a tyrant about what those girls had to do.

In the movies you worked in a vacuum. You wouldn't get that feeling - wouldn't touch your audience - until you sat at a sneak preview. Then you had to go back and shoot a lot of stuff over. Personally, though, I missed the excitement. We Keatons carried excitement in our pockets. If there wasn't excitement, we found it - an accident, a train wreck, a fire - or we made it. One feature of the films did appeal to me though, and that was that it would mean staying in one place for a while. I had been travelling on the road for over twenty years.

I took the gamble and cast my lot with the pictures. From the first day on I hadn't a doubt that I was going to love working in the movies. I did not even ask what I'd be paid to work in Arbuckle's slapstick comedies.

I didn't much care.*

Men who know a good deal about financial matters have often told me I am stupid in my handling of money. I would not say they are wrong. But even though I've spent my whole life in the most insecure of professions, money has never interested me very much. Somehow it never seemed important to me. I am not unaware that one can be extremely uncomfortable without money enough for good food, shelter, and decent clothing. But from my babyhood on The Three Keatons always had enough- and a little more- for whatever they wanted. We even managed to stash away quite a bit in the bank against the proverbial rainy day.

It seems to me that if you are a good craftsman your principal concern should be to keep working. If you manage to do that your employers will have to pay you sooner or later what you are worth. How can they avoid it?⁵⁰

I say all of this, but I must admit being quite surprised to find just forty dollars in my pay envelope at the end of my first week as a movie actor. At the Winter Garden I was to get two hundred and fifty dollars a week. For pictures, I was offered forty. When I asked Lou Anger about it, he said that was all his budget permitted him to pay me. Six weeks later I was increased to \$75 and not long after that to \$125 a week.⁵¹

Roscoe carried me all the way through the picture. Then he talked to me like a Dutch uncle. He says,
"See if you can get out of the Winter Garden. Stick with me." So that was it.

Max Hart, like any other theatrical agent, was not a man to underestimate the importance of a big pay check. But when I announced that I'd been made an offer to play in films and told him I wanted to withdraw from my \$250 a week job in 'The Passing Show', he said I was doing a very wise thing. I says

"I want to get out of the Winter Garden."

"Go ahead," he says, "I'll just tear up the contract." I says,

"Well, what's Shubert got to say about that?"

⁵⁰[How? Easily.]

⁵¹[No agreement between sources, marked * could be reached, so I asked Eleanor. Did Buster know his pay would be \$40, or didn't he?

He knew. I'm sure Arbuckle said 'If you leave the Shuberts and come down here, I'll pay you \$40 a week to be in the films.' And Buster was so fascinated by it that he said 'Yes'.

Possibly another example of Buster not wanting Joe to know. Even so, you will have to make up your own mind.]

"We'll tell him afterwards! he said, "The hell with the money. Movies are the coming thing, believe me. Learn everything you can about that business, Buster."⁵²

THE TALMADGE FAMILY.

On the same day that I entered the business in which I was to enjoy my greatest success, I also met the girl who became my first wife.

Natalie Talmadge, sister of Norma and Constance Talmadge, had tried bit parts in pictures but without much success. At the moment she was working with the Arbuckle unit as a combination secretary and script girl. I was attracted to her at once. She seemed a meek, mild girl who had much warmth and feminine sweetness. Shortly after our first date I met her mother, Peg Talmadge, and the rest of her family. I thought they were all wonderful. They were gay and vital and full of good humor. Incidentally, having grown up backstage, I have never been timid or shy with women. I do not claim I understand them, but neither, I am told, did Socrates, Schopenhauer, or Einstein.

Constance Talmadge: "I couldn't act even when I was a movie star."

Anita Loos: 'I have known any number of actresses who yearned and burned to be movie stars but were just as tiresome as they were ambitious. Norma and Dutch, [Constance] their feet firmly planted on the scaffold of fame, kicked the whole thing apart and were the best of company. Even so, the girls were no match for the engaging woman who gave them birth.

Promoting the career of many a stage and screen star is that matronly nuisance, the 'stage mother'. But Margaret Talmadge, known throughout the movie world as Peg, was a rare specimen of the breed; Peg caused all her nuisance value to pay off in laughs.

The remarkable beauty of Peg's daughters was hard to account for. They certainly didn't take after their mother, whose features were dominated by the kind of scoop nose adorning Bob Hope or, more classically, the archaic stone faces of Easter Island. Peg's blue eyes were small and wishy-washy; her pepper-and-salt hair looked like a neglected bird's nest; and although Peg wasn't exactly fat, her silhouette was sort of lumpy, like an overstuffed shopping bag... Her general appearance was too ordinary to provoke much comment. Peg couldn't have cared less.

The girl's good looks were possibly inherited from their father.

Mr. Talmadge disappeared somewhere long before they became famous, and no one ever seemed to notice.

Norma was the oldest of the three girls, a brunette of glowing beauty, with the black Irish temperament of her forbears, which sometimes gave out danger signals.

Constance, three years younger than Norma, couldn't have been more unlike her sister. Along with a spontaneous wit went an almost childish love of fun. Both off and on screen she was a delectably pretty clown. Because as a child Constance was blonde and chubby, Peg called her 'Dutch', a nickname that stuck throughout her life.

There was a middle sister, Natalie (let's call her Nate as everyone always did), who was born in 1899, a year before Dutch. A brunette, Nate bore a certain resemblance to Norma, but she had a sort of pinched look, as if she harboured the same genes that produced her radiant sisters but had simply failed to blossom into full, lush bloom. Peg tried to organize a career for Nate through bit parts in her sisters movies, but she soon came to grips with Nate's lack of star potential and settled for marrying her off instead.

⁵²[Interestingly enough, Max Hart had recently relinquished a contract with Arbuckle to Joe Schenck. Hart had a contract which guaranteed Roscoe \$200,000 per year; however Schenck offered \$1,000 a day, 25% of the profits, his own company, The Comique Film Co., and complete artistic control, with distribution through Famous Players-Lasky. Hart lost personal profits of at least \$800,000 per year. Yallop.]

The driving power behind Norma's habitual self-restraint and Dutch's razzmatazz was their mama, and although Peg had all the impact of a force of nature, she could joke about her situation.

"I've spent years driving those two wild horses to the trough," she would declare, "and I'll be damned if I don't make the bastards drink!" But Peg spoke with affection, and the term 'bastard' was poetic license, for her daughters were as legitimate as a Jersey City marriage license could make them.

When I was writing scripts for the girls, I was like a member of the family. I accompanied them on location and sometimes we all took holiday jaunts together, either here or abroad. Wherever we went, Peg's wisecracks gave a special accent to our ventures.'

Peg Talmadge: 'She [Natalie] was the serious type, of studious bent, with contemplative eyes. She was an orderly little thing too. She loved to keep her section of the toy closet 'just so'..... We used to call her the 'Just-So-Girl.'

The longer I worked with Roscoe the more I liked him. Arbuckle was the star, I was just one of his feature players, but I respected without reservation his work both as an actor and a comedy director. He took falls no other man of his weight ever attempted, and had a wonderful mind for action gags, which he could devise on the spot.

Roscoe loved all the world, and the whole world loved him in those days. His popularity as a performer was increasing so rapidly that soon he ranked second only to Charlie Chaplin.⁵³

Arbuckle was that rarity, a truly jolly fat man. He had no meanness, malice, or jealousy in him. Everything seemed to amuse and delight him. He was free with his advice, and too free in spending and lending money. I could not have found a better-natured man to teach me the movie business, or a more knowledgeable one. Arbuckle was his own director and I'd only been with him probably about three pictures when I was his assistant director. In other words, I was sittin' alongside the camera when he was doin' the scene. Arbuckle would turn you loose, because he didn't care who got laughs in his pictures. He wanted 'em in there.

Minta Durfee, (Roscoe's first wife): he was "the most unconceited human being who ever lived."

We never had an argument. I can only remember one thing he ever said that I disagreed with.

"You must never forget," he told me that day, "that the average mentality of our movie audience is twelve years."⁵⁴

I thought that over for a long time, for three whole months in fact. Then I said to Roscoe,

"I think you'd better forget the idea that the movie audience has a twelve-year-old mind. Anyone who believes that won't be in pictures for very long, in my opinion."

I pointed out how rapidly pictures were improving technically. The studios were also offering better stories all of the time, using superior equipment, getting more intelligent directors. Griffith's 'Birth of a Nation' was fascinating people who had never before thought of the movies as anything but an interesting toy. They'd shown Griffith's

⁵³[Actually, at this time Roscoe was a bigger and better established star than Chaplin.]

⁵⁴[Hung on the wall of Mack Sennett's office was this saying: 'The extent of the intelligence of the average public mind is eleven years. Moving pictures should be made accordingly.' D.Yallop. No doubt Roscoe had seen it there often.]

masterpiece at a two dollar top, which was as much as was charged then for some Broadway plays.

"Every time anyone makes another good picture," I said, "people with adult minds will come to see it."

On thinking it over, Arbuckle said I was right.

But the low estimate of the audience's mind, I notice, survives to this day in Hollywood. I sometimes wonder if TV, free or not, could have overtaken and overwhelmed the movie industry so quickly if its studio bosses had rejected that myth.

On finally hearing the terrible news about me from Mom, Joe groaned, "Our Buster in the movies? I can hardly believe it."

Though no more considerate of Pop's feelings than most other long-suffering wives, Mom delayed telling him that I'd passed up a spot in a big Broadway show to take the picture job.

"I didn't want to make the poor fellow froth at the mouth," she explained later on.



CHAPTER TEN.

Mack Sennett.

1917>18. Keystone Cops. His Wedding Night. California. Horses.

W.C.Fields, [bragging]: "[Making films is] ...right down my alley. In the old Sennett days I used to drink with Fatty Arbuckle, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the rest of 'em. I can't get the celluloid out of my blood. Nights I used to tend bar." [The Bank Dick, Original screen play by Mahatma Kane Jeeves.]

Though Mack Sennett made his stage debut as the rear end of a horse, he considered his judgement of comedy infallible.

"I have my fingers on the public pulse." he was fond of saying. "If I laugh at a gag on the screen I know the public will laugh."

Mack always enjoyed playing a role in each picture he made, but he got no encouragement from his comedians who told him that he was the unfunniest man ever to walk in front of a camera. But it took them years to convince him.

The mystery is how this seemingly humorless man managed to find and develop more first-rate comic talent than anyone else in the history of show business.

And what talent he developed! Chaplin and Arbuckle were only two of them. Charlie Murray, Andy Clyde, Chester Conklin, Clyde Cook, Hank Mann, Ford Sterling, Harry Gribbon, Heinie Mann, and Ben Turpin were Keystone Cops at one time or other. Even Harold Lloyd was a Keystone Cop briefly. Gloria Swanson, Carole Lombard, and Marie Prevost were among his bathing beauties. W.C. Fields, Mabel Normand, Wallace Beery, Polly Moran, Marie Dressler, Louise Fazenda, and Bing Crosby all made their early movies with him.⁵⁵

Some students of Sennett's career try to explain his unique gift by saying he was in the market when great screen comics were available in quantity.

That's true enough. But it is difficult to remember one performer comparable to Arbuckle and Chaplin and the other great comics who came out of the Keystone fun factory who was developed by the other screen comedy producers who were also around then. Not to be overlooked, too, are the great directors- Frank Capra, Leo McCarey, Malcolm St. Clair and Roy del Ruth- who first learned their business while working with Sennett.

However, there is one guy who never worked for Sennett, although practically every screen historian insists he did. That's me, Buster Keaton. It was an easy enough mistake to make because I appeared in so many of Roscoe Arbuckle's comedies immediately after he quit Sennett.⁵⁶

Sennett's refusal to pay high salaries invariably lost him his great stars as they became prominent. Sennett could not or would not pay the performers who started with him the sort of money other studios offered them. He kept losing them as fast as they became prominent.

His Keystone Cops, even after he had been coining money with them for years, remained the worst-paid performers in Hollywood. At first they got only three dollars a day for risking their necks. After Sennett made a fortune with 'Tillie's Punctured Romance' he raised them to five dollars a day.

⁵⁵[And Harry Langdon.]

⁵⁶[Even Mack Sennett, in his autobiography, 'King of Comedy' claims Keaton worked for Sennett, but then Sennett is a notoriously unreliable witness.]

The Cops were dreamers. All of them lived on the hope of becoming a star or a featured player one day. Every time I saw them on the screen I howled with delight which, of course, broke my rule against being caught laughing in public. Even so, I couldn't understand how they could ever expect to attract attention as individuals, to stand out in the crowd. They were wonderful, in my opinion, but only as a group. In the same way, say, as the Radio City Rockettes⁵⁷ in New York are. It turned out, of course, that I couldn't have been more wrong, for a great many of them did become stars or featured players.

Even more astonishing to me was discovering how few of them knew the first thing about taking a fall. For example, Al St. John, (like Arbuckle an ex-Keystone Cop,) worked side by side with Roscoe for five years without learning one damn thing about protecting himself in a fall. As an old trip-and-tumble expert myself I advised St. John to use elbow pads, something he had never heard of until then. He had been using his hands and elbows each time to break his falls. The result was that he was continually suffering from water on the elbow which, of course, was bound to have serious consequences sooner or later.

Hank Mann, one of Sennett's best comics, was dragged by a horse across a just-plowed field and a couple of city blocks when he tried something new. The horse was supposed to jerk him off his wagon, causing Mann to fly through the air. Without telling anyone of his inspiration Hank decided to turn over while in the air. If he had succeeded he probably would have broken his back. He escaped this only because his trick failed, although he got plenty bruised and bumped before the horse was stopped. Hank also had tightly wrapped the reins around his wrists to make sure he wouldn't let go of them while astonishing everyone with his new trick.

There are few bigger hams, by the way, than these horses. Their ears go up and they are off to the races when they hear the cry, "Camera!" If the leading lady happens to be sitting sidesaddle for the moment, it makes no difference; they will prance, bolt, and throw her off like a limp dishrag. That could mean so limp a leading lady that you'd have to get yourself a brand-new one.

One reason Sennett did not hire trained acrobats for his Keystone force was because a trained acrobat seldom can get laughs in pictures when taking a comedy fall. He looks what he is, a trained acrobat doing his stuff, instead of a character in the picture taking a tumble accidentally. The only trained acrobat I ever saw who could take a fall and make it look funny was Poodles Hanneford, the great circus clown.

'Sennett once confided to his young gag-writer [Darryl Zanuck] that he had one sure test to discover whether he had a really great comedian on his hands, "I watch him fall down," he said. "He'll get a laugh for that, of course. Anyone in the business can make an audience laugh by falling down. But getting back up on his feet- that's the test. If he can make people laugh while he's getting up again, I sign him up for a long term, because that man is a comedian." He maintained that there were only two comics in Hollywood who could do it: Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and he could no longer afford either of them.'

Though I have been called an acrobat I would say I am only a half acrobat, at most. I did learn to fall as a kid, just as Chaplin, Lloyd and Fairbanks did. And I taught myself a few acrobatic tricks, including the round-off back somersault and other simple stunts. I could do butterflies, a series of cartwheels in a circle, without touching hands to the floor. But anyone who ever saw me throw a flip-flap realized I wasn't a

⁵⁷[Equivalent to The Tiller Girls.]

professional acrobat. Audiences think a back somersault, in which you regain your feet without touching the floor, is difficult. But much more difficult to do is the flip-flap, a back somersault in which your hands do touch the floor. The back somersault only looks harder. What I do know about is body control. When you go through the air, you use your head as a rudder- it steers you.

If Steve Brodie had mastered body control he could have jumped off Brooklyn Bridge and had a good chance of surviving, instead of just pretending to have made the jump⁵⁸. The man who jumps or dives has control of his body but, of course, if he is pushed, thrown, or falls accidentally he has none at all. That is why a man falling off a ladder can be terribly hurt.

In my opinion, even Doug Fairbanks was merely a superior YMCA acrobat. His leaps and other acrobatics made him look better than he was, because Fairbanks thoroughly understood camera angles and used them most effectively.⁵⁹

The Cops though, knew nothing whatever about falling. Seemingly no one had told them that both ends of the spine have to be protected when taking a fall. Or that for one kind of fall you must relax your whole body, for another you tighten up the muscles of both your back and backside.

The Keystone Cop who seemed to me the most courageous and lionhearted of them all was little Bobby Dunn, a professional diving champion who was only five feet four inches tall. Bobby joined the Cops one season when the demand for carnival high divers was slack, and Sennett kept him on because of his agility and fearlessness. He placed Bobby next to Slim Summerville, his tallest Keystone Cop, because they looked so funny standing together.

The bravest stunt Bobby ever did, though, was not in a Sennett picture. It was in one of the Sunshine Comedies Henry (Pathe) Lehrman⁶⁰ was making just then for Fox.

On hearing that Bobby was a professional high diver, Lehrman offered him five dollars to jump off the Hotel Bryson roof into a mortar box full of water. The Bryson, in downtown Los Angeles, was eight storeys, and from its roof eighty feet above the street the mortar box, which was nine feet long, five feet wide, and five feet deep, looked about the size of a domino.

When Bobby accepted the offer Lehrmann asked him if he could make the jump on that Friday afternoon.

"I'm making a picture for Sennett all this week." he said thoughtfully. "They'll be shooting on Friday, but I doubt that they'll be using the Cops that afternoon. I'll be able to sneak out all right."

Bobby made the dive headfirst. Diving eighty feet into water five feet deep meant he must hit just right with his chest, then immediately cut upward in an arc. He came up without a scratch, collected his five dollars, dressed, and hurried back to the Sennett lot before he could be missed.

⁵⁸[In July 1886, Steve Brodie, newsboy and former bootblack, bet he could jump the 140 feet from the bridge to the water. Only his friends witnessed the leap, so it was believed he had a dummy dropped and himself 'rescued' from the water to try to collect on the bet without taking any risks.] [To 'pull a Brodie' meaning to fake one's own death is still in use. K.H.]

⁵⁹[Allan Dwan, Fairbanks' Director: "Doug's stunts were not actually great athletic feats, they were good stunts done with great grace. That was the whole key. If Doug had to fight a duel and leap to a table top, I would time his leap- and I would cut the table to exactly the right height to accommodate his ability to leap...If he jumped, it was just exactly the distance he could gracefully jump. Never a strain."]

⁶⁰[Dubbed 'Pathe' by D. W. Griffith because of his lying accounts of experience at the Pathe studios in France. This sort of behaviour seems to have been bred in the bone, during the Arbuckle scandal his lying to gain attention became particularly nauseating, so I have left it out.]

Those two, Bobby Dunn and Slim Summerville, the tiniest and the tallest of the Keystone Cops, were inseparable. They shared a dressing room and never tired of playing all sorts of tricks on one another. The dressing room faced an open shooting stage. On the other side of this was a roofed passageway.

One day, while they were sitting in their dressing room, Summerville remarked, "Did you get a load of that Palm Beach suit and new straw hat that Ben Turpin is wearing today?"

Bobby Dunn nodded his head and said, "He'll be coming to work in a dress suit next thing you know."
"Let's fix him," suggested Slim with a giggle. "I just saw him go through that arch. He'll be coming back in a couple of minutes. Why don't we get a pail of water, then you can get on the roof over there and dump the water on him as he walks through?"
"Well, how will I know he's coming?"

"I'll sit in the doorway here, Bobby, where you can see me. When I take out my handkerchief, give it to him good. Okay?"
"Okay!" said Bobby, and in a jiffy he was on the roof with his pail of water. On getting the signal from Slim, he dumped the water. But Mack Sennett, not Ben Turpin, happened to be the man who was passing through and got the dousing. Later Slim swore to Bobby it was a case of mistaken identity. Sennett was twice as big as the cross-eyed Mr. Turpin, but Bobby did not argue with his best friend.

A few nights later Slim and Bobby were enjoying a few drinks in the Vernon Country Club, a favorite drinking spot for Keystone Cops and other local characters who enjoyed staying out late. Los Angeles had an early closing hour, but Vernon, just beyond the city limits, had none. Bobby that evening bribed the club's bartender to put double shots of whiskey into Slim Summerville's highballs. The supercharged drinks soon made Slim so drowsy he fell asleep at the table.

Bobby got out pencil and paper and wrote a note which he asked the waiter to give to a girl at a nearby table. She was with a man who had the shoulders of a gorilla. She read the note, then passed it on to him. It said:

'Why don't you get rid of that big bum you're with? Don't look around now, but I'm at a table right behind you, pretending to be asleep. I'll meet you out at the back door in ten minutes.'

"Who is this wise guy?" he asked. She looked around, saw the sleeping Summerville, and shrugged. "I never saw that funny-looking string bean before in my whole life."

Her boy friend got up, walked back to the sleeping Slim, and grabbed him by the throat. The next thing Slim knew he was out the back door and flying through the air. On hitting the hard, hard cement he looked up to find Bobby Dunn's smiling face peering down at him.

"What in heaven's name happened?" he asked.

"Don't give it a thought," Bobby told him. "it's just one of them California earthquakes."

(Later I got a big laugh in my feature picture Three Ages by using the note-writing incident. I had Wallace Beery, the villain of that movie, write the note while I slept at the table.)

When Bobby Dunn died his tall, skinny pal was inconsolable. Slim cried like a baby, and he paid more money than he could afford for a funeral wreath. On the way to the church for the funeral ceremonies Slim picked up his mail and during the services kept nervously opening letters and glancing at them. He lined up with the other mourners to

bid a last good-bye to the deceased before the casket was closed. As he passed the body he waved over the dead man's face the bill he'd just got from the florist for the flowers. "See this?" he sobbed brokenly. "Even when you are dead you cost me money, you little sonofabitch."

Then his knees buckled, and he would have fallen if the man next to him hadn't held him up. With tears streaming down Slim Summerville's long face, he was half-carried to one of the waiting funeral cars.

MAY. A RECKLESS ROMEO. *⁶¹

Fans earlier had taught me another thing about my work I had not known. A few fan letters to Roscoe asked why the little man in his pictures never smiled. I was unconscious of it and didn't know it.

Then I started to get a reputation from film magazines and critics of being a frozen-face, a blank pan. We had been unaware of it. We actually went into the projecting room and we ran the first three two-reelers we'd done together to see if I had smiled, and found it to be true. I hadn't, so everything was fine. Just for fun I tried smiling at the end of one picture, just to prove a point- that an audience wouldn't like it. The preview audience hated it and hooted the scene. After that I never smiled again on stage, screen, or TV.⁶²

Was it your father who persuaded you never to smile?

No. Nobody did that. I just simply worked that way, because I learned as a kid growing up with an audience that I just had to be that type of comedian- if I laughed at what I did, the audience didn't. It was on stage I learnt not to smile. I found that if I laughed at my own gags nobody else did; so I stopped laughing. Then, when I grew older, when I'd step on stage or in front of a camera, I *couldn't* smile.

So you stopped laughing ?

Sure, the more serious I turned the bigger laugh I got. So at the time I went into pictures, that was automatic- I didn't even know I was doing it.

When you worked with Arbuckle in the shorts, was your screen character essentially what it was in the later features?

I worked the same way. I always stayed the same way. You're a low comedian the moment you get into character clothes. What you have to do is create a character. Once you've got your realistic character, you've classed yourself. Then the character just does his best, and there's your comedy. No begging.

Any time you put a man into a woman's outfit, you're out of the realism class and you're in Charley's Aunt.

JUNE. THE ROUGH HOUSE. *

I was only with Arbuckle about three pictures, when I became his assistant director, and ended up just practically co-directing with him. I don't mean that in the sense of an assistant director like we have today who sees people are on the set. I mean when he was doing a scene and I wasn't in it, I was alongside the camera to watch it. I directed when he was in the scene. Arbuckle at that time was considered, next to Chaplin, to be the best comedy director in pictures. He directed all his own films. He was a good man to watch.

Did you learn much about timing from Arbuckle?

⁶¹[A * after a film title means that to the best of my knowledge there are no known prints, though this information could easily be outdated.]

⁶²[This, apparently, is not strictly true.]

No. I had that *long* before I came into pictures, because I did the same type of work on stage- The Three Keatons was a rough knockabout act. Picture technique I learned from Arbuckle. But not from an audience standpoint- I learned that for myself and from my father, 'cause I had all that experience. See by the time I'm 21 years old I'm a vet. So by the time I'd spent a year with him, it was no problem at all to direct when I set out on my own.

AUGUST. HIS WEDDING NIGHT. *

Everyone there, [the Biograph barn on 174th Street in the Bronx] was doing drawing-room pix. Tails and evening gowns were all over the place. If you spoke American out loud, monocles dropped by the dozen.

Jimmy Bryant, who had been the anchor man for the Cops, was another doughty fellow who did not know how to take a fall. The fact is that Bryant did not even know how to turn a cartwheel, a trick most nine-year-old American boys learn quickly after they first turn a somersault. Jimmy, a heavy-set man with a bull neck, was the only Keystone Cop who looked like a real policeman. Along with Al St. John, Jimmy left Sennett to work with Roscoe when Arbuckle started making his own two-reelers.

I discovered just how much punishment Bryant was willing to absorb to stay in pictures in one of the earliest Arbuckle two-reelers I was in. I think it was called *His Wedding Night*.

The picture opened in a room above a general store where the girl is fitting her wedding dress on me, using me as a clothing form. The villain's roughnecks rush into the room to kidnap her. But she has just gone to the next room to get some pins. They mistake me for the bride-to-be because I have on the wedding dress, and carry me out the window and roll me down a slanting roof. On the street below Jimmy Bryant is waiting with a seagoing hack. As he waits to catch 'the girl' in his arms he braces himself with one foot on the ground, the other on the step of the hack. I was supposed to fall on him headfirst. He was supposed to try to catch me, and miss. We seldom rehearsed bone-breaking scenes like that one. It was too easy for someone in the scene to be hurt or badly injured. Even if not put out of action the bruised man might dog his work the second time. For the same reason we tried to avoid retakes.

But Roscoe, who was directing, didn't like the way we did this scene. As we were getting ready for the repeat shot, Jimmy Bryant came over to me and whispered, "I don't know how to take off on this one or how to take this fall. So really hit me so it will look all right."

"I'll hit you all right," I said, "but be sure and get a good hold."

As I fell on him I shoved him with both feet as hard as I could. Jimmy hit the ground, going backward, head over heels. He kept on going for about twenty feet, far out of camera range. Meanwhile, I had landed on the hack's two facing seats. One of the roughnecks, Joe Bordeaux, to make sure that the 'bride-to-be' would not escape, jumped off the slanting roof and landed on top of me.

Typically it did not occur to anyone there to ask Jimmy if he was hurt. But if someone had, he would not have complained. Later on, when I had my own company, Jimmy worked with me in many of my pictures. I was able eventually to put him on the regular payroll as a \$125-a-week cameraman. Jimmy was a puzzler. He was intelligent enough to learn all about the intricate film camera. But somehow he just never learned

to fall properly and kept taking the punishment like some battered old club fighter right to the end of his acting days.

Blesh: 'It was during the filming of His Wedding Night. After one typical roughhouse, Al stayed on the floor, face down and legs doubled under. It took five minutes to revive him.

Two interested people watched the rushes next morning. After this particular scene, they asked for a repeat and then for still another. Then they spotted it, an extra furtively aiming a dropkick at the head of St. John, who was already down on his hands and knees

Al leaned over and whispered to Buster,

"The son of a bitch deliberately chose me. I wonder why."

Instead of replying, Buster turned to Roscoe and remarked,

"That scene looked flat."

In the retake a certain extra caught it from both sides. St. John chopped him with a left hook and crossed with a right, whereupon, from his stance on top of a wardrobe, Buster aimed a Borani at him. It was the extra who was out cold this time.

Arbuckle showed concern at last.

"God Almighty," he said, "don't take things so serious. We're not making 'The Birth of a Nation'." '

SEPTEMBER. OH DOCTOR.

OCTOBER. FATTY AT CONEY ISLAND.⁶³

Some newcomers were not seriously interested in a picture career. For example, there was a beautifully stacked sixteen-year-old blonde who got a part with Arbuckles Comique company that same summer. We were working on Coney Island.

The third day on location, Anger said,

"We'll go back to the beginning and shoot everything over."

"What happened?" I whispered to Roscoe.

"Little Cornelia ain't with us any more." Arbuckle replied. "She came in my dressing room, says,

"Mr. Arbuckle, which one shall I wear?" holding two bathing suits in front of her. '

Drops one, then the other, and there she is in the buff."

I stared.

'So you fired her. Are you nuts?'

'Nuts my eye.' said Roscoe. "I had enough sense to get the hell out of there fast.

The door knocked her mother down. She was all set to bust in. The daughter would scream. Ma would yell, 'Rape!' And here would come Pa with the shotgun."

'Oh.' I said.

Roscoe takes the girl on the 'shoot-the-shoots.' And when that boat first hits the water it kind of skids past. But when she hits the second time she has a strong lift to the bow.

Well," Roscoe says, "that'll throw anyone out of the boat that wants to get thrown." See if you don't hang on in other words. I says

All right." He says

Put the girl's clothes on Keaton and we'll try it."

So I doubled for the girl. What we did was, instead of sitting on the seat we crouched on it, just held underneath to hold on. He took me by the hand and we came down that chute, and when that boat hit the first lift we lifted with it. The camera was back about a hundred feet to photograph that, and we went out of the top of the frame.

³[This film contains shots of Buster grinning and laughing.]



That's how far it threw us. Me being the lightest and holding Arbuckle's hand he threw me so that I went just that much higher than he did. When I came down I hit him on the back of his neck as he hit the water. Nobody was hurt though.... In those early films, oh, we got our bumps and bruises and sometimes got laid up for a couple of days; but seldom anything serious.

I took or threw an awful lot of pies. The art of pie-throwing depended on the pie. First, you had to make it with a double crust on the bottom, so you could get a good hold on it without your fingers going through. Then you made the filling of the pie out of flour and water, uncooked, so it would be sticky and stringy, and you topped it off with, say, blueberries and whipped cream, or maybe a nice meringue.

Roscoe and I stayed in New York and shot pictures until October [1917]- I went in in May- and altogether I think we made six pictures there. We were shooting in the studio, but we did in good weather sneak out and shoot exteriors. In most of our pictures at least two-thirds of it would be exteriors. But it was a little too tough to try to do those chases and scenes around the studios in New York. We needed too many changes of scenery, in that neighbourhood you were kind of helpless. So Arbuckle persuaded Joe Schenck that the East was no place for our type of motion picture, we were too crippled and too handicapped trying to do exteriors..

By the end of the year we were shipped to Hollywood.

DECEMBER. A COUNTRY HERO. *

David Yallop: 'The Comique Company moved into the Horkheimer Brothers' Balboa Amusement Producing Company studios on Sixth and Alamosa streets in Long Beach, California, in October 1917. Comique never had its own studios, but rented or leased space in existing studios. The philosophy was sound. Instead of tying up millions of dollars of capital in a huge studio complex, Arbuckle improvised with facilities available at relatively low rents. His view was that the quality of the finished product was not enhanced by wall-to-wall carpeting in the dressing rooms. If he was frugal about nonessentials, he certainly didn't spare the dollar when it came to actual production...One scene in A Country Hero.. involved the wrecking of two Ford cars by a locomotive. The cost of that sequence was over \$20,000 because it took many retakes to satisfy Arbuckle...'

A Country Hero was the first picture we made on the coast. Natalie went along with us. As soon as I got there I sent for my parents. Jingles and Louise, who were still at school in Muskegon, joined us during their summer vacation.

After moving to Hollywood, Pop continued to be snobbish about pictures. But I did get him to work with us in a couple of Arbuckle's. Pop's pratfalls astonished Roscoe and everybody else. The trick of Pop's that truly left the competition speechless was one in which he put one foot on the table, then the other. He'd take the fall, after seeming to be sitting on air for a moment or two.⁶⁴

One day Roscoe was directing a scene in which Pop was supposed to kick me. After the first take, Roscoe said,

"The camera is getting this from the wrong side. Would you mind kicking Buster with your left foot?"

Pop growled,

"I've been kicking Buster's behind now for almost twenty years. I don't need you to tell me how to do it."

⁶⁴[A Hard Act to Follow contains two examples of Buster emulating this stunt. See later.]

Roscoe laughed and called lunch. When we went back he had the camera moved to the other side of the set so Pop could kick me in his traditional manner.

"Movie acting is all right if Buster's directing me!"

Joe Keaton to all and sundry.

<1918.>

Marie Dressler, of course, had a magnificent sense of humor along with the fighting heart of a crusader. Long after she became a great stage and screen star she continued to resent the small pay she'd got as a young Broadway chorus girl. It was just like Marie to undertake a one-woman campaign to do something about the chorus girls who were still underpaid. In 1918 she insisted that Equity, the just-formed stage actor's union, protect the chorines as well as more important performers, and kept fighting until she won. She didn't give a thing what you thought of her, you see.

JANUARY. OUT WEST.

I didn't know it at the time, but I turned out to be Arbuckle's whole writing staff for gags.

In Out West, there is a music-hall set piece about a slightly ramshackle top hat that is kept brilliantly in the air by repeated gun shots.

It has to be an old hat. You couldn't use a new hat. Otherwise, you don't get your laugh. Audiences don't like to see things getting spoiled.

When the Arbuckle Company moved to the Coast in 1918, we worked at the Hockheimer Studios in Long Beach. We did some of our wild chases back of the studio. There was a gravel pit there on the side of a big hill. Before long Roscoe and I got very interested in the man who was carting away gravel on his horse-drawn dump truck.

We became friendly with this guy, and Roscoe asked him a lot of questions about the business- how much the horse and wagon cost, their maintenance, how much he paid the owner of the pit for the gravel, and what he got per load from his customers.

"What do you get for a load?"

"Five dollars." was the reply. "Haul five-six-a loads a day."

"Hear that Roscoe? What say we buy the pit? Hire drivers and wagons, sell gravel, and make a hundred dollars a day. And still have our location."

"Keen!" said Roscoe.

"A natural!" said St. John.

"Do you know if this pit is for sale?"

"Sure thing." he answered. "My brother-in-law, he own the pit. He sell and go back to Italy."

I forget the figures on his profits that he gave us, but it sounded like a potentially lucrative undertaking. Roscoe was so impressed that he asked the owner how much he wanted for the property. He was told he could buy twenty-four acres, including the site of the gravel pit, for \$2,400. Roscoe discussed this deal with me and St. John, and we agreed to put up \$600 each for the property. We planned to buy a good many horses and dump trucks of our own and turn the one-man operation into a thriving large-scale business.

We needed just one more investor with \$600 to throw into this sure thing. Somebody suggested Lou Anger, and we rushed to tell him the good news. Lou went

out with us, looked at the gravel pit, and then asked a few shrewd questions of each of us in turn. Questions like:

"Do you know anything about gravel?" Roscoe said,

"No." So did St. John and I.

"Do you know anything about horses?"

"Why no but- " Roscoe started to say, but Lou was already asking Al and myself the same question and getting

"No." from both of us.

"Do you know anything about dump trucks?"

Each of us shook our heads.

"Now," said Lou, "do you know anything about motion pictures?"

"I think so." replied Arbuckle. When Lou turned to each of us, we ventured to say we thought we did too.

"O.K., boys. Then if you have \$600 apiece to invest, invest it in movies, the one business you know something about."

As he walked away, Roscoe said,

"Isn't it great to have a fellow like Lou Anger around to save us from making foolish investments?" Al and I agreed heartily.

MARCH. THE BELL BOY.

My own experiences with animal movie actors were, at times, exasperating. The first of these occurred while I was making a two-reeler with Roscoe Arbuckle called *The Bellhop*. In this story we were running a hotel, assisted by Alice Lake.

The climactic scene was a bank robbery. After pulling off this job the robbers, making their getaway, jumped on a horsecar that was going up hill on a cobblestone street. They forced the driver to whip up his steed. The big moment was supposed to come near the top of the hill when the traces broke, jerking the driver through the air so that he landed squarely on the horse's back. Meanwhile the horsecar with the bandits still aboard rolled down-hill right into the bank they'd just held up. But the driver missed the horse's back the first time he tried it.

When the driver proved a bit shy about repeating the jump, I offered to double for him. It was a tough jump to make because the horse had to be kept four and a half feet ahead of the car. This prevented his kicking the front of it with his hind hoofs.

I had the prop man put a box in the car for me to stand on. This enabled me to make a better take-off. I also wound the reins tightly around my wrists so they couldn't slip.

Not being horsey people we didn't know that horses can see backward or that this one may have resented being jumped at by the first driver. Otherwise we would have put blinders on him. If we had he couldn't have seen me coming and neatly stepped to one side, causing me to miss him completely. He was a mean critter, pardners, that innocent-looking horse. The moment I jumped he bolted like mad up the street, dragging me bumpety-bump on my chest over the cobbles for almost a block before anybody could stop him.

Even after that experience, I expected no trouble from a sway-backed old nag we bought for Cops, one of my two-reelers.

MAY. MOONSHINE.

Shot at Mad Dog Gulch in San Gabriel Canyon.

JULY.THE COOK. *

I played with Arbuckle until the spring of 1918 when I went into the Army.



"My boy's been out there twelve months without a scratch "

"Good heavens! what insect powder does he use?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

My career at the rear.

1918>19. W.W.I. Shots. Cooties. France. Sunshine Players. Homo.

Then war was declared. In June 1918 I was drafted⁶⁵. I joined the colors and served in Uncle Sam's World War I Army as a thirty-dollar-a-month private. My salary by that time had been raised to \$250 a week, and Joe Schenck generously sent my parents twenty-five dollars a week during all of the time I was assigned to the infantry. I spent eleven months in the army, seven months in France in which I was more useful, I am afraid, in camp entertainments than I was in the more ordinary part of soldiering.

Nate, my future wife, went back to New York. My folks returned to Muskegon where Pop quickly got a job in a munitions plant that was making artillery shells. Ignoring the fact that I was in the infantry Pop wrote in white chalk on every shell he worked on,
'Give 'em hell, Buster.' ⁶⁶

I was sent to Camp Kearney, near San Diego, where I had one of the briefest spells of boot training in American military history. Our outfit was the 159th Infantry of the Fortieth Division, which was nicknamed the Sunshine Division. We were to be shipped to France, everyone said, as soon as transportation could be provided. They weren't kidding. After a few days in quarantine I was given shots in double doses. I had only ten days of drilling on the Awkward Squad, or just long enough for me to learn to obey the commands of 'Salute!' 'Halt!' and 'Forward March!' This with arms benumbed by those high-powered injections.

I was then put in with my regular squad. I might have done fine there if some impulsive officer had not given a command I had never heard of. It was:
"To the rear, march!" I went forward as everyone else turned and went backward. Immediately I got hit on the chin and knocked down by somebody's gun butt. I wasn't unconscious, but I might as well have been - because I couldn't get up. While I lay there in a dazed condition, my brothers-in-arms, my dear buddies, either had to jump over me or step to one side to avoid kicking me.

Unable to understand what was causing all that jumping and stepping aside several officers came running up along the side of our company. Only after bending down and looking through the legs of the men were they able to see my small crumpled figure. "Company, halt!" the most alert of the officers shouted. They then ran in, dragged me to my feet, and asked,
"Are you hurt?"

Hurt! I was far ahead of them. I imagined I had been wounded and downed in battle with the German Army.

"Did we win?" I asked. I spoke in all seriousness. But nobody knew that, and everyone laughed, which is the sort of thing that often gets a man an undeserved reputation for being a wit. I was not amused at all to find slapstick flowing over into my new life in the Army. I took being a soldier quite seriously, studied the Morse code regularly, also map reading and semaphore signaling. On mastering these subjects I discovered that I was the best-informed private in my outfit. While in the Service, in fact, I never

⁶⁵[conscripted.]

⁶⁶[I have found no specific confirmation from the Guns, not that I doubt it for a second. For instance, Edmund Blunden, in his 'Undertones of War' 1928. 'Meanwhile the men spent hours in contemplating those big guns and their shells chalked with monotonous jokes about the Kaiser and Crown Prince.' The time is well before the American entry into the war, so clearly it was common practice to chalk messages on the shells.]

met an enlisted man, including some who had joined up during the Spanish-American War, who had more than glanced occasionally at the Army training manual.

We were shipped East and quartered at Camp Upton, Long Island. There we were kept up for three days and three nights while being equipped for overseas duty. We also received additional medical shots.

It was not always possible to take that war seriously. In the first place I could not understand why we, the French, and the English were fighting the Germans and the Austrians. I had met too many kindly German performers - singers and acrobats and musicians - to believe they could be as evil as they were being portrayed in our newspapers. Having known Germans, Japanese jugglers, Chinese magicians, Italian tenors, Swiss yodelers and bell-ringers, Irish, Jewish, and Dutch comedians, British dancers, and whirling dervishes from India, I believed people from everywhere in the world were about the same. Not as individuals, of course, but taken as a group.

I also resented my uniform which made me look and feel ridiculous. Apparently, the Quartermaster General had never anticipated that anyone five feet five inches tall would be allowed to join the United States Army. My pants were too long, my coat looked like a sack, and wrapping Army puttees around my legs was a trick I never mastered. The size eight shoes handed me were far too big for my size six and one-half feet. The shoes also were made of leather as tough as rhinoceros hide. Old-timers in our outfit had long given up hope of ever getting uniforms that fit them. They had theirs altered at civilian tailor shops. They also bought sturdy workmen's shoes, which they managed to disguise well enough to pass inspection.

All of this may explain the few times when I forgot my determination to be a good little soldier. The first of these lapses occurred the day I phoned Natalie, and she came to Camp Upton to see me.

She arrived at our Hostess House in her family's oversize Packard at about one that afternoon. The Packard was driven by a liveried chauffeur and had a Victoria top. She looked gorgeous. So did the Packard. The combination gave me ideas. We noncommissioned nothings were restricted to the camp, but our officers were not. However, because it was hot at Camp Upton, those exalted beings were not wearing their jackets, and their khaki shirts and black knitted ties looked exactly like ours. If I rolled out of camp with Natalie in that eye-popping car I might easily get by the sentries, it seemed to me. I would not, after all, be wearing my private's overseas cap or my oversize jacket. Unless one of the sentries looked over the side of the car he would never see my baggy pants and clodhopper hobnailed boots.

I planned to salute the sentries as casually as our officers did. When saluting, the private, particularly if he was a rookie, stiffened up and snapped his right hand to his forehead, holding it there until the officer returned the salute, then snapped it back to his side. The officers (and also veteran professional soldiers) did not snap the hand until they had it almost to their right eyebrow. They did not snap it in taking their hand away, just let it fall to their side.

If I had been able to imitate Houdini, jabbering Chinese, and Pop on the stage, I figured I ought to be able to get away with imitating an officer saluting a sentry.

I asked Nate whether Camp Upton was near any place where we could have some fun. When she said it wasn't far from Long Beach I got into the car, and we started off.

We got out all right. The inner sentry and the outer sentry both saluted me smartly as we rolled through the gates. In return I gave them my languid and indulgent officers salute.

In those days Long Beach was still a fashionable seashore resort. It had a fine eating and dancing place, 'Castles in the Air'. This was one of the many enterprises started by the late Vernon Castle and his wife, Irene, at the height of their fabulous vogue as a dancing team.

I cannot deny that I felt rather foolish walking into that imposing dine-and-dance palace in my baggy pants and clodhopper boots. But we had a grand time. It was a relief to be eating educated food instead of Army chow, and to drink coffee that tasted like coffee. We had a wonderful eight or ten hours together that day. Natalie paid the check as I didn't have enough money on me. Then we drove back to Camp Upton where both the inner sentry and the outer sentry saluted me smartly.

A day or two later we left on a transport for France. I must say I have traveled in more comfortable style. We slept in hammocks that were hung three abreast in four tiers, one above the other.

The cooties we were to know so intimately later on were already on board.⁶⁷

We got off at an English port- which one is still a World War I secret as far as I am concerned. From there we walked to something which the British called a rest camp, their greatest case of mistaken identity since Dr. Jekyll turned into Mr. Hyde.

After two days we were moved to another rest camp. At both camps the English fed us the same stuff three times a day.

The trouble was we didn't like it the first time. The meal consisted of a bit of yellow cheese about the size of two dominoes, one hard-tack biscuit, and a cup of tea without sugar, milk, or lemon.⁶⁸ After a day at the second camp, we boarded a transport that carried us across the English Channel to that beloved France which is always so jolly a place except when a war is going on. I was close enough to hear it, but by the time I 'hit the front', the Germans were in retreat, which was a great thing. I was tickled to death at that.

The Channel boat was so crowded that we crossed standing up. There was room on the boat to sit down, but it was being used by other soldiers who were standing up. On debarking we were marched eight miles to another camp. There was one thing I never figured out about the French terrain in that war. Wherever we marched in France we seemed to be going uphill. This was true whether we were leaving camp or coming back to camp. Walking in oversized hobnailed boots may have a stronger effect on the human brain than psychologists realize.⁶⁹

In the French rest camp we slept in circular tents, our feet in the center and our heads close to the drafts from the great outdoors. We were told not to open our packs except to get out our blankets. This, it was believed, would enable us to get to a shelter more quickly in case of an air raid. This was the beginning of an experience I have never forgotten.

During my seven months in France as a soldier I slept every night but one

⁶⁷[Cooties, army slang for lice, which were in constant supply in all theaters of WWI. Many soldiers hated them worse than the enemy.]

⁶⁸[This censure is echoed in much harsher form in many W.W.I. memoirs.]

⁶⁹[Denis Winter from 'Death's Men': 'Second to the weight of the pack as a source of tribulation to the marching soldier were his boots...it was a lucky man who avoided side effects from the long march. Blisters followed friction, and callouses followed pressure. Doctors even coined a new phrase- footsloggers nodule- for the callouses 3/4 of an inch wide and 1/2 and inch thick which came from the pressure of laces on tendons. After their first route march, men would often fall over when they started walking in their own shoes again.']

on the ground, or on the floor of mills, barns, and stables. There was always a draft close to the floor of such farm buildings, and I soon developed a cold which imperiled my hearing. Before I was overseas a month my superiors had to shout orders at me. Even so, I was corporal Keaton by the end of the war.

In that war we saw little but rain and mud. But this is not the reason I recall so clearly the first day the sun shone. I found some blackberries along a road that afternoon, and climbed up on a low stone wall to pick them. While bending over I became aware that someone was behind me. Looking through my legs I could see the leather puttees of an officer and the end of his little swagger stick. I straightened up, turned around, and came to attention. He was a major.

"As you were!" he said. I had been taught that 'As you were' meant that I should immediately resume whatever I had stopped doing at the command "Attention!"

As I had been bending over picking blackberries when interrupted by the major I went back to that. It never occurred to me that this unimaginative major would wait there to be confronted squarely in the face with my rear end. Instead of saying something witty, he hit me over the bottom with his swagger stick. Caught off-balance I fell head-first into the prickly blackberry bushes.

Before I could get up, the major started down the road. I yelled after him, "I hope your war's a failure!"

His shoulders wiggled. He may have been amused. The important thing is that he didn't turn back, and I was free to continue eating those good wild French blackberries.

No matter how tired and dirty we got, no matter how some of us squawked, there were always doughboys who kept their sense of humor. I remember the day a mob of us tumbled off an overcrowded train. We were filthy and felt the cooties were eating us alive. But one buddy, who was washing and had his face full of soapsuds, yelled,

"Childbirth may be painful, but if you get any of this Army soap in your eyes it's hell!"

He had a pet story that he used to do quite often when they'd march into these small towns. He was the littlest one always so he'd be down on the end of the line, so while the brass is up there showing off, getting them to line up and march and present arms and do all their manual drill, he'd be down on the end, and he'd be down there doing everything wrong. And he'd get all the natives hysterical, so they would know him the next time they saw him. They had a little coupon that would get them some bread or something, and he would go in, and he'd not only get twice as much as what he was supposed to have, but he could also get fruit or vegetables, or extra things they might have, they'd sell him everything in the shop that nobody else could get because he made sure they knew him. ⁷⁰

The Army delayed for quite a while before giving us us any part of our thirty-dollar monthly pay. Doubtless, General Pershing did not want us to waste it on riotous living. Until that first payday came we thought of nothing but food, for we'd been given nothing but Army rations- beans, canned corned beef, and hot liquids of mysterious prigin.

⁷⁰[It's also possible they knew him from film, Arbuckle was extremely popular in France.]

That first payday we jingled the francs in our pockets and hurried to get all of the food possible into our bellies. The rations had brought out the long-dormant executive side of my character. Weeks before, a pal and I had dickered with the keeper of the nearest French tavern for the franchise on two plates of steak and French fried potatoes. We had been dreaming about how that steak would taste every night since. But that was going to be only part of our big meal. On getting our money we went from one farmhouse to another, buying eggs. They cost a franc apiece, and the franc was then worth twenty cents. But we didn't stop until we had twenty-two of them.

We carried the eggs to the tavern and asked the owner to use them for a giant omelet which we ate as a side dish to our steak and potatoes. The steak was about a quarter-inch thick, but it tasted better than all of the chateaubriands I've had since.

After the armistice we were shipped from Amiens to a little town near Bordeaux. Along with our infantry division, two others- engineers and machine gunners- were quartered in that town whose population was about 12,000. That meant 45,000 American soldiers. We waited there for months to go home again and had to sleep on the ground or on the floors of barns, mills, and cellars.

After the war ended there were three or four times as many soldiers as there were transportation ships, so they had to kinda wait in line. And Buster was assigned to put on a show. So with all army equipment and army personell, that had enough talent to move their feet, he put on a whole show, and they played all the army camps all over Northern France, until it got to be time for them to go home.

The war ended in 1918, it was well into 1919 by the time he got back.

The Sunshine Players had been assembled by H.Q. simply selecting, 'Twenty-two men who could do something'. We organized a few entertainments built around our regimental band. I did a burlesque snake dance and other routines in these hastily thrown together shows.

One day an officer read me a Headquarters directive instructing me to do my snake dance at a dinner being given for a brigadier general at his Headquarters about ten miles away.

I had to walk there. I might point out that all of that sleeping on the ground had done nothing to improve my appearance. My trousers were still too long, sagged in the seat, and my puttees had shrunk in the rain. Unfortunately, the size eight shoes on my size six and one-half feet had not shrunk at all. And they now had horseshoe plates over the hobnails.

When I finished the show a lieutenant asked how I was going to get back to town. On hearing I'd have to walk, he managed to borrow The General's official car for me. The General's insignia was, of course, on the door of the car, and an American flag flew bravely above it. All of this gave me an idea. If the General's orderly, who was driving, would co-operate, I could surprise any buddies of mine who happened to be in the town square that night. They all figured to be there.

Another payday had just rolled around which meant everyone not crippled would be there, singing, drinking that good French wine straight from the bottle, and kissing any French girls within kissing distance.

The orderly agreed to co-operate. So I got into the back seat, pulled down the car's side blinds, and suggested he head for the town's Hotel Grand. Except for the

town hall it was the most prominent building on the square. None of the carousing privates, corporals, sergeants, and young officers there had seen a general for six months, and they all jumped to their feet as the car stopped before the hotel. The orderly got out and hurried around the car to open the back door for me. All over the square I could hear bottles dropping to the ground as the men and officers jumped up and came to attention. 'My' orderly also stood at attention as I stepped out of the car in my dusty, wrinkled uniform. Over my shoulder I said,

"I won't need you any more this evening."

"You sonofabitch!" went up from hundreds of parched throats. I cut for the nearest alley, and thanks to my arduous stage conditioning got up enough steam to race out of town, where I slept peacefully through the night in a barn.

I sneaked back again in the dawn's early light, but the sergeant spotted me.

"Captain wants to see you, corporal."

I didn't know what my captain wanted, though I knew damn well he wasn't summoning me to promote or decorate me. But when I reached the captain's office he said:

"Those were two great shows you put on last night. I liked the second one best- I could court martial you, I suppose, but you sure put life into the old town square last night, not to mention scaring the hell out of a lot of my young officers who thought they were in for a surprise tour of inspection. We must not let them get too smug, corporal, must we?"

I agreed that we mustn't.

Later on I was assigned to a train that was carrying about 900 wounded men to the redistribution center at Le Mans. I was the only noncommissioned man sent on the trip. It proved a complicated job. We had to get the wounded men all of their equipment and rations, then settle more than forty of those poor fellows in each of twenty-two 40-and-8 boxcars.

40 men and 8 horses were how the boxcars were designated. That's what they could hold.

On our way back from Le Mans we were to make connections at Paris for the train to Bordeaux. We could have made them but preferred to miss them and stay overnight in Paris. As Paris was out of bounds, that meant technically being AWOL, but it also meant we'd sleep in beds for one blessed night and could enjoy a real dinner. I had thirty-five francs for that big feed.

Now I must go back for a moment to an incident that occurred shortly before I was drafted. For some time Roscoe, Al St. John, and myself had been annoyed by the airs and graces of a sissy type Romeo who was paying court to beautiful Anita King, who was making a picture on the next set. This ninny would hold her coat, skip ahead to open doors for her, kiss her hand, and pick up her glove as though she had done him a favor by dropping it.

Needless to say, we found all of this sickening.

One day I observed that this mushhead was watching us start a sequence in which Roscoe was to throw a pie at Al who would duck, letting me, standing right behind him, catch it right in the face. It was a simple matter, of course, to set this up so that Anita's hand-kissing fool would be right behind me. All I had to do was also duck, and the mincing Romeo got the pie right in his obsequious kisser.

The three of us ran up, and apologized loudly. While pretending to help clean the mess off his suit we spread it around a little more. He was suspicious, but had to take our word for it being an accident.

On our great night in Paris we were in the middle of our meal when this same little man, now a major, strutted into the restaurant. We stood at attention. I took one look, and the moment he said, "At ease!" I scooted out the back door. If he had recognized me, he could have had me court-martialed as technically AWOL.

Late one night I had a narrow escape while coming back from a card game. I had become almost stone deaf. A sentry challenged me, and I didn't hear his demand for the password, or the two warnings he gave me after that. Then he pulled back the breech of his gun, prepared to shoot. My life was saved by my sixth sense which enabled me to hear that gun click- and stopped me dead in my tracks. After bawling me out the sentry listened to my explanation and got me past the second guard. From that day on the fear of losing my hearing permanently drove me half crazy.

On getting back to New York I was sent to a receiving hospital which originally had been the Siegal-Cooper Department Store. Specialists told me I would have to remain under observation for a while. But they assured me that with proper treatment my hearing would be restored.

I prayed they were right.

<1919.> BACK FROM THE BACK.

March/April. Repatriated.

The moment I could get to a telephone I called Natalie at her home. Joe Schenck's office was nearer the receiving hospital so she asked him to hurry over. When he saw me Joe looked as though he was going to cry.

"You look terribly peaked, Buster." he said. "You've lost so much weight. I never saw you look so sick and miserable."

"Why shouldn't I look miserable- with my beauty gone forever?" I asked.

But I wasn't fooling Joe that day with wisecracks.

"Of course you haven't any money." he said. He took out his wallet and gave me all of the money in it.

The first things I bought with the money were a decent-looking uniform and shoes that fit me. I wore these the first night I went to dinner with Natalie and her mother in their Park Avenue apartment.

Shortly afterward the Army sent me to Johns Hopkins Hospital, in Baltimore, for observation. The doctors there found my hearing and my health generally so improved they kept me there for only three days.

He got, I would think three-quarters of his hearing back, but every time he'd get a heavy cold that eardrum would collapse, and he had to go to the doctor and get it blown out, blown open.

While I was in New York I had found it impossible to believe I was really home. Then one day in Baltimore the doctors let me take a walk. I headed straight for the local Keith Theater which Pop, Mom and I had played dozens of times in the old days.

I walked through that stage door, and the house manager, the crew, the orchestra boys, and the acts greeted me like a long lost pal. Then I knew I was indeed safe home at last. On the bill was one of my best friends, Artie Mehlinger, the singer. I stood in the wings and watched his act- Step, Mehlinger, and King- hoping with all my heart that I would never again have to leave show business and its bubbling, joy-filled, gifted people.

When I became strong enough to travel I couldn't wait to get back to California

and my job. I had been mustered into the service at Camp Kearney, and I should have been mustered out there. But the discharge clerk made a mistake. He sent me to Camp Custer, Michigan, because I had given Muskegon, Michigan, as my home on joining the Army.

Needless to say, this caused considerable confusion at Camp Custer, but the clerk kindly gave me the fare to go on to Los Angeles. The mistake enabled me to see my folks and our old neighbors, but I was so eager to get back to work that I stayed in Muskegon for only three days.

Before I was out of uniform I received two \$1,000-a-week offers. One was from Jack Warner, the other from the William Fox Company. But I preferred to resume working for Joe Schenck at my old salary of \$250. I couldn't see how I could go wrong stringing along with a square-shooter like him who had been so kind to my family. I had never met a finer man in show business. I haven't yet.

Sam Goldwyn: [of Joe Schenck] "His verbal contract is worth more than the paper it's written on." Commonly misquoted as 'A verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on.'

'Joe Schenck never seemed to remember that [Darryl] Zanuck was not Jewish and was always putting his arms around him and saying: "We Jews should stick together. It's us against the schmucks."' [Leonard Mosley]

I was released in May 1919. I'm back out of uniform, and I went back to Hollywood and made two more pictures with Arbuckle.

Buster and Roscoe were very close, very best friends. They lived together for a long time when Buster first came to California after World War One, until he got married and got his own place.

Shortly after getting out of the Army, by the way, I had brought my family back to California, and I'd been living with them ever since. Pop visited my studio each day for lunch. I used Joe in my films. He spent his evenings in the backstages of Los Angeles vaudeville houses, finishing up each night in the speak-easies with old vaudeville pals.

Louise was only eleven or twelve when the family moved to California. Of course they weren't on the road anymore, Buster was in film by then, so they had a regular family life from then on.

It seems a very peculiar marriage breakup, that Myra and Joe would still be on good terms...

Well, the only problem was his drinking, and when he suddenly decided to dry out and didn't drink anymore he was perfectly amiable to be around, he was a darling man, and the kids loved him, and I presume Myra did too, she never got around to divorcing him or marrying anyone else. So it's just the whole thing was his drinking, and when he stopped drinking he was back in the fold so to speak, but they never lived together after that.

CHAPTER TWELVE.

When the world was ours.

1919>20. The Golden Age. Buster Keaton Co. Any clod...

Molly Haskell: '...and in the twenties...there were a great many female comics of varying types. Although none ever had the sustaining artistic vision of a Keaton or a Chaplin, or even of a Harold Lloyd....

If Chaplin never achieved the sublime equanimity with women that Keaton did, it is perhaps because women were more traumatically crucial to his life and to the ego at the center of his art. Keaton was detached, almost complacent; for him, women, like the elements and the machines with which he achieved rapport, were part of the scheme of things, a technological-sociological-meteorological harmony of parts with which his own motions wondrously synchronized. We hardly know the names of Keaton's actresses, whereas Chaplin's, though not stars in their own right, enjoyed a one-to-one relationship with him and were psychologically central to his stories.

Keaton is not upset by woman's incompetence; on the contrary, he is alarmed by her competence. Keaton was one of the few directors, or artists of any kind, to envision (and envision himself with) both kinds of women- the soft, feminine dodo, the towering Amazon, and even a soft, feminine Amazon and a towering dodo. The Amazon heroine is offset by the sweetheart, a hardy if foolhardy specimen, who can be counted on to do something enchantingly imbecilic at the crucial moment. Keaton's women (we can almost hear them, like the secret amplified into a roar) rise up in a glorious cacophony of mixed moods and emotions, a testimonial to the tolerance of their creator.'

I sometimes wonder if the world will ever seem as carefree and exciting a place as it did to us in Hollywood during 1919 and the early twenties. We were all young, the air in southern California was like wine. Our business was also young and growing like nothing ever seen before. There were bad times elsewhere in the country for a while. And there were other troubles: strikes, race riots, a Red scare. But everybody said that was to be expected with millions of men getting out of uniform and trying to find civilian jobs.

Nobody suspected that the World War just ending would prove to be merely the first one. Had not President Wilson proclaimed it the war to end all wars- if we jumped in and did the dirty job?

In Hollywood you could all but feel the prosperity in the sun-bleached air. Actors, directors, and other lucky people were getting salaries unheard of before in show business, or for that matter, any industry. Combines were forming and re-forming with skullduggery on a scale to make a Ponzi or a George Graham Rice sick with wistfulness.⁷¹

War industries had put money into the pockets of millions of Americans who never before had any money to pay for entertainment. Everywhere magnificent theaters seating thousands of persons were being built. These were designed to make the movie fans feel like kings and queens. Now the stage show, when there was one, was the secondary attraction.

The golden age of comedy was just beginning. The whole world wanted to laugh as never before, and Hollywood had the clowns to do the job. There were soon to be years when the pictures of Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and myself would outdraw the pictures of most of the screen's romantic stars. For nobody ever made so many people laugh as did Charlie with his little tramp. And there never was a time in history when

⁷¹[Infamous big-time con-men.]

more people needed something like Charlie's tramp to help them forget their fears and troubles.

Mack Sennet's *Keystone Cops* and *Bathing Beauties* were still popular. But that king of comedy makers was soon to be overshadowed.

The most important of all the movie groups formed that year was United Artists, which was founded by the world's three most beloved movie stars- Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and Charlie Chaplin- and D.W. Griffith, the screens most distinguished director. Each of the four, it was announced, would control every detail in the producing of his own pictures, including their financing. 'United Artists' one function was to be distribution of their films.⁷²

Few of us in that whole Hollywood gang had had time to acquire an education. I suppose we were doing the things in our twenties that we would have done earlier if we had gone to high school and college. We also drank a lot just as young people all over the country were doing, as the Riproaring Twenties rolled in on endless barrels of bootleg booze.

There was a period when our whole gang, meaning Roscoe Arbuckle, Norman Kerry, Buster Collier, Lew Cody, and a few others, were barred from half the movie lots in Hollywood. One of the studios was Samuel Goldwyn's. The bars went up there the morning after a party at Goldwyn's house that Kerry, Buster Collier, and I attended. Collier started to tell us about his grappling match with a professional wrestler in the picture he was making. In telling a story, Buster could be almost as spellbinding as Willie Collier, his father. When he mentioned a hammer lock, Frances Goldwyn, Sam's wife, kept asking so many questions about it that Buster finally said, "It will save time if I demonstrate it."

Frances laughingly suggested he demonstrate it on her. While showing Mrs. Goldwyn the hammer lock, she resisted, and the next thing anyone knew they were scuffling and rolling around on the floor. Everyone was laughing and enjoying this when Goldwyn, who had been playing cards in another room, walked in. He stared at them, said,

"Oh, my!" and walked out. Norman Kerry, who was standing next to me, said,

"Well, that's one more lot we are barred from, Buster."

Well, they were all really good friends but I think it had to do with strictly playtime, going out to nightclubs and dancing, dining, all of that kind of situation, because Buster seemed to have one group of card playing friends, and the studio group for work and baseball playing and all of that kind of thing. The groups didn't seem to cross over that much because they all had different interests, and I never did know what the Buster Collier, Norman Kerry, all of that outfit, they were just out dining, dancing and playing kind of thing. Buster Collier was one of Buster's best friends who romanced Constance for many years.

Norman Kerry was a very heavy drinker, always, even much much later when I knew him. When Buster lost all his money to Natalie and he dried up and quit drinking, that kind of ended the association with all these other guys, because they had all been users, enjoying Buster's prosperity eating and drinking all his food and all of that kind of stuff. So when Buster didn't have it anymore they kind of dropped out.

Buster's oldest friend, Lex Neal, he went back to vaudeville and childhood, he used to be in and out and he was also a very very heavy drinker. He'd come in

⁷²[UA's first release, 'His Majesty, The American' starring Douglas Fairbanks, was a modest hit in autumn 1919.]

and pass out on our living room couch.

How did Buster deal with that kind of thing?

Ignored it. And he died of cirrhosis of the liver in a hospital and Buster went and visited him, sat with him the last day or two he was alive.

Hoot Gibson was a cowboy actor too, like Tom Mix, and he, I know for sure, wound up owing Buster quite a bit of money when he died. He'd come and Buster would loan him a thousand or five hundred or this or that, because they all just sorta went broke. I don't know if others borrowed from him but I know Hoot Gibson did, because Buster said something one time about he wished Hoot would get a job so he could pay him back some of the money he owed him because he could use it.

SEPTEMBER. BACK STAGE. *?

At the start of Backstage an eccentric vaudeville dancer came to us looking for work. St. John had just left us to do his own pix at Warner Brothers. This guy looked a little like Al, so Roscoe signed him as a heavy. All day long this guy's little five-year-old son- a cute little devil- hangs around, singing and dancing for us between scenes. Does that give us any ideas? Not us.

Well to cut it short, a few months later, Papa is resting. Just rocking on the veranda and counting his dough. His little boy is in the movies and making gold for the family. We had hired Jackie Coogan, senior; Charlie Chaplin signed Jackie Coogan, junior. We didn't have the sense to build a pic around this kid; Chaplin did. The picture was called 'The Kid', and it was a million-dollar hit.⁷³

Jackie Coogan: "My dad knew all the people in LA. It was like a great club. He was captain of the actors' golf team. He was also captain of the crap-shooting team. He got to LA with the act after a fifty-week tour and Chaplin saw me. Roscoe came down and asked Father if he wanted to go to work in the movies.⁷⁴ Meanwhile I had met Chaplin. He was anxious to get into 'The Kid'; it was to be his first feature. He was giving a lot of thought to it, but he does not at this stage relate me to it, he doesn't tie me up or anything. So my Dad goes down to San Diego to finish his tour, then it's announced in the newspaper that Jack Coogan has been signed by Roscoe Arbuckle. For Charlie the penny drops, he goes nuts, he says, "I can see that fat son of a bitch with the little boy. God, why didn't I think of that?" Chaplin became determined to buy Roscoe out. He sends people down to discuss a deal with my father. This is done in complete secrecy. My father tells him, "No, it isn't little Jackie who Roscoe's signed, it's me." Chaplin gets me contracted, fast." [D. Yallop.]

OCTOBER. THE HAYSEED.

JANUARY. THE GARAGE.

I made just two more pictures with Roscoe- The Hayseed and The Garage.

In those free-and-easy days we all had fun making comedies. We worked hard. We stayed with the story all of the way. In the old days all of us- Chaplin, Lloyd, Harry Langdon, and myself- worked with our writers from the day they started on

⁷³[Hedda Hopper: 'Jackie Coogan's boyhood earnings were so scandalously dissipated by his family that the law was changed to protect child actors- but Jackie was left penniless.']

⁷⁴[I consider that Buster's version, i.e. that Coogan approached Roscoe, is somewhat more likely.]

a story.⁷⁵ We checked on the scenery, the cast, the locations- often going on trips with the unit manager to pick these out ourselves and make sure they were suitable. We directed our own pictures, making up our own gags as we went along, saw the rushes, supervised the cutting, went to the sneak previews.

So you used the preview system for most of your films?

Always... Well, we used to sneak a picture out of town. One of our main reasons for takin' it out of town was so that none of our carpenters or extra people or anybody connected with studios would be in that audience. Because if we had an outstanding sequence or cute gags or good gags or anything like that, these people would sell it to other studios. Sometimes they'd sell it and sometimes just to get in good with somebody, says,

"Here'd be a good gag for you..."

And we had that happen to us a few times. So our previews- we'd take 'em out to Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Bernadino, Santa Barbara, Riverside, Santa Ana- places like that. And we don't tell the audience they're lookin' at a preview. See, we want a cold reaction. We'd send the print down there to the exhibitor, and he's goin' to have two shows that night, he runs the picture twice. And he advertises- a Keaton picture, that's all. So we're in there to get a normal reaction. Well, we have never made a picture- I know I never did, and I know Lloyd never did, and I'm sure Chaplin never did- that we didn't go back and set the camera up again. Because we helped the high spots, and re-did the bad ones, and cut footage out, and get scenes that would connect things up for us. We always put make-up on and set the camera back up after that first preview. And generally after the second one also.

(We used the preview system from my) first picture. Arbuckle , in those days, it didn't make much difference to him. They says, "This is it." and that was that. But when it started gettin' a little bit more serious- we took advantage of the preview. But our system was not lettin' the audience know so that the audience wouldn't yes us. The minute you got in one of the major studios- Oh, I fought my head off at MGM when I went there- and find out that they ballyhoo it. So that you got the audience in there, the minute it says, 'MGM Presents' the audience applauds. And different characters come on the screen, they applaud 'em. They applauded the director's name, they went out of their way to laugh at things that the normal audience didn't laugh at. They yessed the b'j.. the life- right out of ya. (Laughs) Well, that hurt me. I didn't want that at all. I couldn't stop 'em. Well, that's because, workin' at a major studio, all companies are assigned to a producer. Well, the producer wants to make sure that the high brass of the studio sees a good picture even at the first preview.

Because of the way we worked in those days I am baffled by the lackadaisical working habits of many modern-comedy stars. This could be one reason for the deterioration of screen comedy since the talkies came in. There are other reasons, of course. In the silent days we could try anything at all, and did. We were not supervised by business executives who lacked a sense of humor. We were the ones who decided what should go into a script to make the audience laugh. All our bosses asked of us was that our pictures make fortunes, and our pictures did.

No comedian has ever been so worshipped around the world as Chaplin was in those years. Kids in the streets of cities and towns on the five continents imitated Chaplin's quarter-to-nine walk, his smile, and his gestures. They wore derbies like his, smudged

⁷⁵[In fact, it seems that Chaplin worked in conflict with his writers, and Langdon had to be forced into doing as Capra directed.]



shoeblack on their upper lip for a Chaplin mustache. They skittered round corners and tipped their derbies as his little tramp did, tried to do the tricks Charlie did with his bamboo cane. Theaters all over the world kept holding endless Charlie Chaplin contests.⁷⁶ Their customers insisted on it. It is not hard to understand. At his best, and Chaplin remained at his best for a long time, he was the greatest comedian that ever lived.

Like everyone else, I'd been aware of Charlie Chaplin's talent from the first time I saw him in a vaudeville sketch 'A Night in an English Hall'. But I must confess that it never occurred to me that he would one day be acclaimed as the greatest comedian of all time. One reason I underestimated Charlie, I think, was because there were so many first-rate comics on the stage in those days. I had seen all of them, worked in vaudeville with all of them. At that time Charlie did not seem to me funnier than Will Rogers, Willie Collier, Bert Williams, Frank Tinney, and some of the others.

I was always puzzled later on when people spoke of the similarities in the characters Charlie and I played in movies. There was, to me, a basic difference from the start: Charlie's tramp was a bum with a bum's philosophy. Lovable as he was he would steal if he got the chance. My little fellow was a workingman and honest.⁷⁷

For an example, let us say that each wanted a suit he saw in a shop window. Charlie's tramp would admire it, search in his pockets, come up with a dime, shrug, and move on, hoping he'd be lucky next day and have the money to buy it. He would steal the money if he couldn't find it any other way. If not, he would forget all about the suit.

Though my little man also stopped, admired the suit: and had not the money to buy it, he would never steal to get it. Instead he would start trying to figure out how he could earn extra money to pay for it.

Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd from the start were smarter businessmen than I. They became millionaires early in the game by producing their own pictures and retaining control of their film properties. This means they are in a position to earn fresh fortunes for themselves any time they feel like leasing or selling the TV rights to their old silent movies.⁷⁸

Charlie Chaplin's mind is so frisky and intuitive that it is difficult to surprise him. Yet I have caught him off guard at least twice.

The first time was on a night away back in 1920 when Charlie and I were drinking beer in my kitchen. He was going on at a great rate about something new called communism which he had just heard about. He said that communism was going to change everything, abolish poverty. The well would help the sick, the rich would help the poor.

"What I want," he said, banging the table, "is that every child should have enough to eat, and shoes on his feet, and a roof over his head!"

Naturally, this amazed me, and I asked, after thinking about it a minute or two, "But, Charlie, do you know anyone who doesn't want that?"

Charlie looked startled. Then his face broke into that wonderful smile of his, and he began to laugh at himself. I myself have gone through life almost unaware of politics, and I only wish my old friend had done the same. He must know by now that communism, wherever it has been practiced, bears not the slightest resemblance to

⁷⁶[One of which Chaplin reputedly entered and lost.]

⁷⁷[See 'High Sign,' only example of Keaton's 'little man' stealing.]

⁷⁸(As this was written Chaplin's old movies, in fact, were being revived successfully. Samuels)

the benign system he described to me forty years ago. I do not really think Charlie knows much more about politics, history, or economics than I do. Like myself he was hit by a make-up towel almost before he was out of diapers. Neither of us had time while growing up to study anything but show business. But Charlie is a stubborn man, and when his right to talk favorably about communism was challenged he simply got bullheaded about it.

Chaplin's troubles began when he started to take himself seriously. That was after he had produced 'A Woman of Paris'. Most people forget it now, but this was the first time suggestion was used on the screen to convey an idea.⁷⁹

When Charlie wanted to tell his audience that his heroine, played by Edna Purviance, was taking a train he did it with a shadow of a cardboard train and a six-foot section of first-class railway coach. To tell the audience that she was the mistress of the Paris man-about-town, whom Adolph Menjou portrayed, Charlie merely had Menjou use his own key in entering her home and then take a clean collar from a bureau.

That made motion-picture history. But the avalanche of praise for Charlie's brilliant directing also turned his head, I am afraid. It was his misfortune to believe what the critics wrote about him. They said he was a genius, something I would be the last to deny, and from that time on Charlie Chaplin, the divine clown, tried to behave, think, and talk like an intellectual.⁸⁰

Lloyd's screen character was quite different from both Chaplin's and mine. He played a mama's boy who continually surprised everyone, including himself, by triumphing over an impossible situation and displaying, in fits and starts, the fighting heart of a lion. Often Lloyd seemed more acrobat than comedian. But whatever he was on the screen he always did a lot better than all right.

Harold Lloyd: 'Buster had tremendous training. As a little boy, he was in vaudeville with his parents... His father appeared to treat him terribly, threw him all around. Buster learned the knack of making falls better than any other comic I know. He could make the funniest falls and the most weird ones, and he knew how to do it without getting hurt. But underneath that, Buster was a true comedian. He learned the art of timing and spacing, which is basic to all comics. Buster created a character who was comic to look at, in the little way he walked, the clothes that he wore, and, of course, his characteristic of never smiling. By not smiling, Buster made his task all the more difficult. Like all good comics his body movements were generally funny. But he had to depend on his body and go along on that same facial expression. Chaplin didn't handicap himself like Buster did, Chaplin could smile or do anything he wanted, which helped him tremendously. He could not have been the great pantomimist that he was if he had to keep a stony face like Buster. Buster knew gags. He knew how to put them together and to condition them. And his conception of his character and the way he did it was excellent. That's what a comedian has to do. He has to know his own character thoroughly. He has to know comedy, at least the type of comedy that he's doing. Every comedian has to be a scholar in comedy so that he can know just what he is doing.'

There is no question but that Harold Lloyd was one of the great contributors to the comedy of motion pictures. His was the inventive knack of situations; no one could ever forget his antics with the big clock in *Safety Last*. He was indeed a product of the movies. While Charlie Chaplin and I came from the stage, Harold used the camera for tricky effects with consummate skill.⁸¹

C.Bishop: Of course your way of creating character for situation is very different from Chaplin's character.

⁷⁹[I believe this is not strictly true.]

⁸⁰[I believe this is strictly true.]

⁸¹[I have minor doubts about this quote.]

Well, he starts and stays a bum at all times. He was handicapped there. He is always a bum.

C.B. He was always a bum and Harold Lloyd was usually the country boy...

Who went to the big city to make good.

C.B. There is a consistent character in all your films who, for instance, seems to be quite helpless with machinery.

Well, as a rule- I'll take two different comics. You took Harold Lloyd off the farm and you put him into the Ford Motor plant in Detroit. He would be afraid to touch anything, unless he was forced to by one of the foremen or something. With me, I would be just as scared of it but I would take it for granted that I ought to know what I'm doing and set out immediately to try and do it. And of course I'd gum it up- that's what would happen to me, because I don't know what I'm doing but I'd make the attempt.

F. What did a feature picture cost in the early 1920's?

I ran the lowest of the three making them. I ran around \$225,000 to the picture. That would include my salary. Harold Lloyd, he would go a little more than that, up to \$350,000. And Chaplin went higher still. No one knows exactly how much money Chaplin made out of his pictures, possibly not even Charlie himself.

The reason is that there is no way of figuring out how much they cost.

Of course, Charlie was a little lazy at times. He stopped immediately trying to make two pictures a year, satisfied to make one; then after he'd made a couple like that, he'd skip a year, make one, then he'd skip three years, and make one; he got very lazy.

F. I've seen you quoted too, I think, as saying that Chaplin would sometimes go to Europe in the middle of making a picture.

Oh, sure! Take a trip. Take off somewhere.

During the years the three of us were going good we had no failures. That's right. There were no flops for any of us all through the Golden Twenties. Nothing but smash hits all over the world. Chaplin's features earned an average of \$3,000,000 each in theater rental fees. Lloyd's \$2,000,000; mine between \$1,500,000 and \$2,000,000..

There is no secret about how much Lloyd's features earned for him. These each cost from \$300,000 to \$350,000 to make. The distribution costs were about 35 per cent of the \$2,000,000 in the rentals paid for them, or \$700,000. That puts Lloyd's earnings at almost one million dollars per full length feature! or about \$30,000,000 in all for the thirty features Lloyd made. The bankers got none of this loot because Harold, as soon as he was able to finance his own pictures, stopped borrowing from them. My own features cost from \$200,000 to \$225,000 to make. Add to that 35 per cent of the rental fees, and you can compute the profits. I refuse to do it on the grounds that it will degrade and depress me.⁸²

<1920.>

THE BUSTER KEATON COMPANY.....

Starts solo. 1920-29 Keaton makes 19 two-reelers and 12 features. During the same period Chaplin made 3 shorts and 4 features.

Viola Dana: "Oh Buster, he was, well, the original man that came to dinner. My brother-in-law brought him home for dinner one night, and he stayed for three years. And of course Buster became one of the family, my mother was just, well, she was crazy about him, he was like a son to her, and wherever we moved we figured on Buster. I think the extent of his wardrobe was a toothbrush [laughs] which he carried in his pocket. But he was a darling, he was a doll."

⁸²[And I won't do it on the grounds that my maths is unreliable.]

Shortly afterward, in January 1920, Marcus Loew bought the Metro studio, (this was quite a while before it ever became Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, because when I made my two-reelers then I released through Metro). He wanted to make sure his chain of theaters would have a steady supply of quality pictures. Its stars then included Nazimova, Viola Dana, Bert Lytell, and May Allison, among others.

Then Adolph Zukor, head of Famous Players-Lasky Corporation [which merged with Paramount in 1916] and an ever growing chain of movie theaters, bought Arbuckle's contract from Joe Schenck. Zukor had decided to star Roscoe in full-length, five-reel features. The Roundup, the first of these, was a box-office triumph.

The Arbuckle pictures were Paramount release. When Joe Schenck sold Arbuckle's contracts to Paramount, the deal that he actually set up was one in which Arbuckle was paid by both Comique and Paramount at the same time. His contract with Schenck guaranteed him \$1,500 a week, and the Paramount arrangement gave him an additional \$3,000 a week. He was also to receive 25% of Comique's profits. And the minute Schenck did that he turned Arbuckle's company, the troupe, over to me and then went and bought me a studio of my own in Hollywood and set me out makin' pictures of my own. He got me the old Chaplin studio so it became the Keaton studio. And I was right next to the old Metro.

Then [Nick] Schenck in New York tells Marcus Loew that he's going to sell Arbuckle to Paramount for feature pictures, and he's going to make two-reelers with me. Now, Loew knew me from the stage- he knew The Three Keatons. And he probably had seen me in a couple of the Arbuckle pictures. He's a theater owner, Loew's Incorporated. He had just bought Metro studios; and the Metro studios were next to the new Keaton studios. He's also bought the Metro exchange, which operates throughout the world, and he's taken over the contracts of all the Metro stars. Loew wanted our pictures immediately, so before I ever put on misfit clothes and started makin' my own two-reelers he signed us. And he says, "I'll take the Keaton pictures."- before we even started to make them!

And he put me in a big featured picture for Metro that was a famous show in New York.

Being a good showman, Loew saw from the beginning the need for better stories. He goes to John Golden, the Broadway playwright, song writer, and New York's leading theater producer; who did 'Seventh Heaven', 'Turn to the Right', and 'Lightnin''. Golden and Belasco were the two leading producers of dramatic shows, although Golden didn't hesitate to do light comedies, such as 'Officer 666'. Loew engaged Golden as an adviser on theatrical properties, and says, "I want one of your famous shows. I want to make a special feature immediately to try to improve the quality of pictures at Metro."

Among other plays, Golden suggested he buy Bronson Howard's old play, The New Henrietta. The original show on Broadway starred the famous William H. Crane and Douglas Fairbanks. This was one of Fairbanks' big hit shows on Broadway- before he ever sees a studio. Fairbanks had played the juvenile role and also portrayed the same character in his first picture, 'The Lamb'.

Loew says,

"Get me William Crane to play his own part, and give me the stage director. Has he had any experience in a studio?"

"No." says Golden.

"Well, we'll put a motion-picture director in with him." So they get Herbert Blache. Schenck even sent out the New York stage director Winchell Smith (to supervise the

film). Mr. Crane was bought out to play his original role, but they can't get Fairbanks. He's now a big star with United Artists.

John Golden asked Doug and Mary Pickford, who were married soon afterward, to suggest someone to play his role of Bertie.

"Metro's going to make 'The Henrietta', and William H. Crane's going to play his own part." Fairbanks said,

"Who's going to play my part?"

"We don't know." Fairbanks says

"I know who to get. You have the perfect man for it right there." Golden says

"Who?" He says

"Fellow named Buster Keaton." He says "Well, after all, Keaton's never had anything on but misfit clothes and slapshoes all his life, you dress him up and he'll play Bertie the Lamb for you."

So I did.

So they put me in Fairbanks part, the character was called 'Bertie, the Lamb, Van Alstyne', and his father is a Wall Street multi-millionaire. So I had to dress with the best clothes that the tailors could fit me to for the makin' of that picture- a bit unusual for me. But this was a screen version, it didn't tell the story of 'The Henrietta'. The story was rewritten so that Bertie became the main character. The Saphead was the name of it, and it ran for seven reels at a time when Metro's biggest dramatic stars were making only five-reelers. The picture, the first I starred in, was one of the company's big hits that year.

The Metro film immediately ran into trouble. The original Bertie, Stuart Robson, claiming ownership of the book, held up release until October. By then, Buster had made two more two-reelers of his own. When production of The Saphead dragged on into summer, Buster began concurrent work on his own. All summer he shuttled back and forth across the street from Metro to Keaton, changing costumes and characters as he ran.

Finally, The Saphead opened at the Capitol in New York. Feature-length films got top program placement and commanded reviews that shorts could not ordinarily elicit. The film immediately invited comparisons between its new star and the well-established Chaplin, whose sensational hit with Jackie Coogan was running at the same time.

Robert Sherwood wrote in Life: 'It is just as well that Charlie Chaplin did not wait any longer before releasing 'The Kid', for otherwise he might have awakened one bright morning to find that his crown had passed to the pensive brow of Buster Keaton.'

The New York Times critic wrote: 'With Mr. Keaton as its center of gravity The Saphead becomes one of the gayest comedies of the season- for this Keaton gravity is a bubbling source of merriment.'

Variety: 'His quiet work in this picture is a revelation.'

[Many of the gags were Keaton's.]

When I finished making The Saphead, Schenck turned over Arbuckle's unit to me. In fact, he bought me Chaplin's old studio and renamed it the Keaton Studio. Charlie had built a new place on La Brea. Then I started there on my own.

Joe handed me a new contract, which gave me \$500 a week plus 25 per cent of the profits my pictures made. I suggested that I make only features in the future, but he wouldn't agree. Schenck insisted I return to the two-reel field. I couldn't convince him that comedy features were the coming thing. If I'd won that argument it could have made a big difference to my career. Neither Chaplin nor Lloyd were making features at that time, and I would have had a headstart on both of them. In saying this,

I am not trying to belittle the achievements of either of them. But who could? Their popularity is even more impressive today than in the twenties when they were active.

That was in a day when theaters charged only a fraction of what they charge now for their attractions. When we were making two-reelers theater owners would bill them above the full-length films they were showing. The majority of the exhibitors would advertise our picture above the featured picture. You see, we never got on the same program with Bill Hart or Doug Fairbanks or Mary Pickford or Gloria Swanson or Mabel Normand or any of the big stars of that day. We always got, well, I'd better not name the names, but the exhibitor was practically paying as much for our two-reelers as he did for the feature. Often our silent comedies out-grossed the feature films made by the most popular romantic performers in Hollywood. That was one reason I was eager to make features like those Roscoe Arbuckle was successfully turning out at Paramount. It seemed obvious that rental fees for full-length pictures would continue increasing. But I also believed Joe Schenck, being a shrewd businessman, must know what he was talking about. So Schenck began featuring me in two-reelers. And all he did as the producer, he says,

"You're to make eight two-reelers a year we're going to release through the new outfit that Marcus Loew has just bought, called Metro."

I just set out to make those eight pictures a year.

Well, I did make shorts for about two and a half years. I made my first series of eight two-reelers with Metro, I released 11 First Nationals. And then Marcus Loew decided I should do features. So I went into features in '22... I came back to Metro to do features.

Blesh: 'Not long before Buster met Arbuckle, Joe Schenck had gone into motion-picture production. He rose with a rapidity astonishing even in the movies. Now he had just had a hand behind the scenes, it was said, [correctly] in founding United Artists..... Schenck talked to Keaton on Arbuckle's front porch. First he asked whether Buster planned to marry Viola Dana. It hadn't worked out, Buster replied, adding that he was going with Natalie. This seemed to please the older man. Natalie, of course, was his sister-in-law. Arbuckle, Schenck went on to say, was now going to be put into feature length pictures. Schenck paused. Buster was all for rushing right in to congratulate Roscoe on his good luck. But Schenck laid a restraining hand on his arm. He had more to say. Buster, he said, was ready to do his own pictures. He would inherit Arbuckle's company, with Arbuckle moving into a new company that Schenck was setting up for him. There were more details: Loew (this meant Schenck too, though he didn't say so) was about to buy Metro and would release the Keaton comedies with the Metro trademark and, of course, through the Metro distribution system. But, Schenck immediately added, Buster would make his pictures in the old, proven way, with interference from no one, great or small. Schenck said that he had rented Chaplin's old lot for Keaton, on Lillian Way, right across from Metro. How soon? Only a month or two. The formalities were simple. They shook hands and called it a deal. Nor, so far as Buster himself can recall, were there ever any papers. He gave hardly a thought to the business aspects of his new situation. While Schenck was explaining them, Buster had barely listened, his mind already far ahead planning new routines... The exact organizational setup of the Keaton Film Company may never be known. It was, and has remained, highly nebulous to the outsider. Perhaps intentionally so, perhaps not. Its details were never public. The corporation has been inactive for some three decades. Now Schenck himself is dead. And in business matters Buster's recall becomes practically nontotal. He remembers a few details. He says that he owned no shares in the producing company and that all his arrangements were verbal. His memory is of a generous Joe Schenck who

would let him work as he wished, pay all the bills, and (the words are Keaton's)

"give me a thousand dollars a week and twenty-five percent of the net."

It is to be doubted, however, that the Keaton Film Company was so casually organized as this. Its board, headed by Joe Schenck, included men like Nicholas Schenck, A.P. 'Doc' Giannini (the Bank of Italy founder), David Bernstein, and Irving Berlin. In a 1925 story in the Saturday Evening Post, Alexander Woolcott wrote of Buster Keaton as 'the patient offspring who was tossed around and: bounced against the scenery [but] has since come up in the world.... his antics now converted into celluloid on so large a scale that they have incorporated him. It is- or was- possible to own shares of Buster.'

Anyway, this seems sure: Buster owned none of the shares.⁸³ And this too is quite evident: a big business stood or fell with him. There were, he says, annual board meetings, which he describes as

"festive weekends in Atlantic City following the World Series."

The Schenck's would rent an entire hotel floor. So far as the company's star ever knew, the board meetings, at least on the boardwalk, were social, and social on a most lavish scale. If there were business meetings, he was not invited.

Peg Talmadge: "' [Alma Rubens]...She's still a star but in her advanced state of drug addiction, it can't be for long. On the other hand, I look around at the film stars who are foolproof. How come Theda Bara, with a face like a smudge and a body that hasn't had an outline in years, has retired, a millionairess in her own right and a society leader with her name in the Los Angeles Blue Book? And take that Gish kid...she's moved away from her mother and sister into her own apartment, just to have peace and quiet to study those scripts D.W.[Griffith] dreams up for her. Folks like to wisecrack that she wants a place of her own to entertain Norman Kerry, but I know better. I bet the movie ham will never be born who can take Lillian's mind off her salary check."

I tried to argue Lillian's interest was in art, not money.

"Then she'd better change," snapped Peg, "or she'll end up in Springfield, Ohio, where she came from, taking in lodgers. But nothing short of the apocalypse is going to stop that Crawford kid from getting ahead. And when Gloria Swanson gives her all, it's to a Boston billionaire."⁸⁴

"So there's got to be some difference between kids like Jewel and Alma and my kids. It can't be a matter of talent, because any clod can be trained to make faces at a camera. I'm telling you that a movie star is in as dangerous a spot as a baby who's been set down in traffic on Forty-second and Broadway. Her looks open up bigger areas to make mistakes than any ugly girl ever runs into. She attracts a larger assortment of freeloaders, pimps, agents, husbands-worst of all the kind who try to handle all four rackets wrapped up in one. It would be dangerous enough if Norma and Dutch were wild over sex..but they aren't. In Norma's case it's practically the reverse. She backs away from Joe [Schenck] like he was a swamp. But it begins to look now as if she's getting a crush on that sex-sufficient hambone Joe hired to play opposite her. [Gilbert Roland] Joe is a big-hearted schmo, but just the same I can't imagine him giving those two his blessing. And much as I hate to face the fact, I realize that Norma is lacking in forethought.

Seeing that Natalie didn't develop along sexy lines, the fact that her brains rattle isn't too dangerous. It's Dutch I'm most scared about- scared that laughs are always going to mean more to her than security... I wouldn't want Dutch to take herself seriously and get a swelled head, but there's a limit to foolery.

⁸³[The morality of Buster's not having any shares in himself seems questionable to say the least. Dardis states that Buster 'felt that if he acquired shares, he would be obliged to worry about how the firm was doing...' But why should he have to acquire them?]

⁸⁴[I believe this refers to 'Bootlegger' Joe Kennedy, who made an attempt to make a fortune with Swanson which produced the only complete flops of her entire career, whereupon he gave up on Hollywood.]

D'you know what happened last week?" Peg asked. "Well, I dropped by the publicity department, where Nate was autographing Dutch's fan pictures. Now Beulah Livingstone had had one of those asinine brain waves she gets paid good money for, and she thought up a new slogan to write on Dutch's pictures; it was 'Merrily yours, Constance Talmadge.'

Well... what did I find? I find that Dutch had objected to Beulah putting a coy word like 'merrily' into her vocabulary, so she ordered Nate to write 'Screw you!' on those pictures and sign them Constance Talmadge! If I hadn't torn up a whole stack of those photos, Dutch would have lost a hundred paying customers." Such were the nightmares that kept invading Peg's dreams of security.' [Anita Loos.]

Roscoe and I were having dinner one evening when he told me he wanted to take me for a ride.

"Where are you going?" I asked him.

"Never mind, Buster, you'll find out when we get there."

I could tell very soon, of course, where he was heading. As we neared the site of the Hockheimer Studios, he said,

"Do you recognise that hill? That's dear old Signal Hill."

"Wasn't that the hill in back of the old Hockheimer lot?" I asked.

He said it was indeed, and drove around it so I could count the oil wells. The Shell Oil Company had started drilling on the property on March 23, 1920, and the oil had since come in. By 1921 there were some five hundred derricks going, two years later more than 1,000. This makes the area, which is slightly more than two miles square, one of the most intensively developed oil fields on earth.

Roscoe shook his head and said,

"And to think I thanked Lou for talking us out of buying twenty-four acres of that oil-soaked real estate!"

"There went a million-dollar load of gravel. What did Anger say when they discovered oil?"

"Lou! We had him tied up for days. Wanted to jump off the pier."

"Well, you should have let him jump."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

Nothing like baseball, to take your mind off your troubles.

<> Baseball. Boris Karloff. Practical jokes. Hippos.

As far back as I can remember baseball has been my favorite sport. I started playing the game as soon as I was old enough to handle a glove. A sand lot where baseball was being played was the first thing I looked for whenever The Three Keatons played a new town. We always had a team in Muskegon, and later I organized baseball teams at my own studio and at M-G-M. I also played in the annual Comedians-Leading Men games that amused Hollywood for years. Each September I did my best to finish my fall picture in time to go to New York for the World Series.

I took Marcus Loew to one crucial World Series game back in the twenties. In the eighth inning, with the Yankees one run behind, they got two men on base and had Babe Ruth at bat. Nobody in the crowd of 68,000 tense fans seemed to be breathing when Marcus turned, looked over the packed stands, shook his head, and said, "You know, Buster, this raises hell with our matinees!"

I loved the yearly Comedians-Leading Men benefit games played in Hollywood each year, because they gave me a chance to combine baseball and comedy, the two great loves of my life. But I suppose none of these could compare with the mad routines Roscoe, Al St. John, and myself put on during a 'one ol' cat' game at the Vernon Baseball Park.⁸⁵

Vernon then held the franchise in the Pacific Coast League which was later transferred to Hollywood. A brewer owned the club, and he had talked Roscoe into investing a few thousand dollars in the organization. The brewer also suggested we put on a little show before the opening game of the season.

We started with Roscoe pitching, Al St. John at bat, me catching, and Rube Miller, a one-time Keystone Cop, umpiring behind the plate. After Roscoe threw two perfect strikes, which umpire Rube Miller called balls, I signalled to Roscoe for a high one. When it came I let it go right through my hands. It hit Miller square on the mask. He did a typical Keystone Cop leap into the air and fell backward. His mask rolled off, and he lay as though dead.

Though we ignored him and let him lie there, he came to life in time to join us in the next play. In this Al St. John kept creeping up a little closer to the pitchers box each time Roscoe started to wind up. Arbuckle would get discouraged, would stop, look, then start winding up again. Each time the batter took another little step forward both Rube Miller and I would follow close behind him, maintaining the traditional crouch. By the time Al St. John was almost halfway to the pitcher's box Roscoe decided he better take a few steps back himself. When he finally threw the ball he was pitching almost from second base. The ball (made of plaster of Paris at our studio) exploded into dust and vanished the moment St. John whacked it. Pitcher Arbuckle, catcher Keaton, and Umpire Miller looked everywhere for the vanished ball, in the air, in our pockets, in the pants of Roscoe's capacious uniform and under Umpire Miller's chest protector. Meanwhile Al St. John had streaked for first base, stopping there to bow and tip his hat to the spectators. Going to second, to third, and home he stopped at each bag to acknowledge the plaudits of the crowd.

On Al getting to bat again, Arbuckle wound up. But before he could throw the pitch, a ball dropped from the sky at his feet. It came down five to ten minutes after the ball was hit. It was, of course, a regular Coast League baseball thrown by an unseen outfielder from back of the grandstand. And now I tried to tag out St. John and a general melee and hubbub followed.

⁸⁵[One old cat. A form of ball play in which the players batted one at a time until caught out, the catcher-out then batting. 2:1161. K.H.M.M.]

There were other surprise features, including a bat loaded with gunpowder which exploded when Arbuckle hit the ball and sent it spinning out into the wild blue yonder, farther than any ball hit by Ruth, Gehrig, or Mickey Mantle. And a little ceremony in which Umpire Miller was dumped into a grave we had prepared for him back of third base. After that, the season's opening game began.

The ballplayers enjoyed all of this clowning, but not the umpires. They got hold of the four of us after the League game was over and gave us hell. One said "You have given the players murderous ideas with that pitch you let go into the umpire's mask. They will all be trying that within a month in every ball park in the league. We will have to bench every catcher in the Pacific Coast before the season is over."

Every year they used to have a big comedians and leading mens game to benefit the Mount Sinai Hospital. They would have a whole bunch of leading men on one team and a whole bunch of comics on the other. Well, they always had three or four times as many comics as they could use, and not enough leading men, because the leading men that were under contract to studios, and the studios didn't want them to play for fear they'd get hurt, especially if they were in the middle of making a film. So some of the politer comics used to have to go play on the leading mens team to fill them out. For instance, Ronald Reagan broke his leg sliding into first base, and that was the last time *he* ever was in a leading mens/comics game, Warner Brothers wouldn't allow him to play any more after that. I don't know if he was in the middle of a film or not at the time.

How long did these go on, was he still doing them when you were with him?

Oh yeah. They kinda.. I don't really know why they kinda stopped, I couldn't tell you, but I know they went on for six or eight years [until 1946-8]. Maybe it had to do with television knocking the socks off the motion picture business, and a lot of the comedians and leading men and everything else scattered to look for work other places and they couldn't scrounge up enough people to fill out two teams.

For instance, one of the games they had, all Three Stooges were playing third base, and none of them could catch a ball. Every time the ball came near 'em they were knocking each other down, but they never caught a ball. They always had wonderful stuff like that.

Have you read anywhere in any of these things about the incident with Boris Karloff?

No?!!?

That was hysterical. It was right after he'd done the Frankenstein monster, and they put him on the leading mens team. He came in full make-up, and of course the make-up was green, and they kept him hidden inside until it was time for him to come up to bat. Buster was catching, and they turned out all the lights in the stadium except for a spotlight, and they hit him with the spotlight and he did his walk thing, very slowly, up to the plate, and he had a baseball bat, it looked like a toothpick in his hand he was so big, because they had these great big lift shoes on him. They had regular baseball umpires, and Buster said to the umpire, something like,

"Turn around here and help me fix my glove." or my mask or whatever, and he said, "Don't look up until I tell you." So when Karloff got to the plate, Buster says,

"Okay, turn." Buster took a look, ran, and climbed the screen, and the umpire, when he turned round and looked he says,

"Holy God." and he went right straight back and hit the ground, he almost fainted he was so scared at this green thing standing there. So that was

absolutely hysterical. I guess it was the biggest laugh they ever got in those games. But that's the kind of thing they did.

Boris Karloff: '...the only time I really enjoyed playing the Monster was at the annual charity baseball game in Hollywood between a team of comedians and a team of leading men. I strode up to the plate for the occasion in my full make-up as Frankenstein's Monster- whereupon Buster Keaton, who was catching for the comedians, promptly shrieked at the sight of me, did a backward somersault and passed out cold behind the plate.

I waved my bat. The pitcher tossed the ball in my direction, and I swung at it as best I could, encumbered as I was with the monster's metallic overalls. Luckily enough I managed to tap the ball, which bounced crazily in the general direction of the pitcher's box. It should have been an easy out at first. But as I approached each base the opposing player fainted dead away. And the Three Stooges, who were playing second all passed out cold. It was a home run- though horrible!'

Did Buster actually know Boris personally?

Probably met him. I always thought, and somebody told me I was totally wrong, that the man sitting next to Joe Keaton at the dinner table in The General, when Buster's hiding under the table, I thought that was William Henry Pratt, looked identical to him. I always thought it was, and somebody said 'no it wasn't', I don't know how they thought they could prove that it wasn't. Absolutely identical. It's the one that Joe was talking to when Buster peeked out through the hole in the table cloth. I think it was Pratt with the cigar that burnt the hole in the first place that Buster peeked out, and his face was right between Karloff's knees and Joe Keaton's knees. The next time you see that you take a good look. Because he worked in Hollywood as an extra and worked himself up in small parts and everything before he became, well actually I don't think he had much of a career before the monster, and he probably was not averse to working in a Keaton film just as a small bit thing.⁸⁶

Later on when Buster was on the writing staff at MGM they decided it would be fun to have baseball games between the studios. So they got all revved up, and I think they just got t-shirts and hats for uniforms, they didn't go into heavy expense, and everybody always thinks they can play baseball. One game they had at Twentieth Century Fox, they had a baseball diamond there they had used in some film. So everybody went over there, and of course the MGM Lions were the MGM team, and they had a baby lion that went as a mascot. I got to hold it. It was only about four weeks old, little tiny thing, and of course the trainer and the animal person was there as well to look after him. But the first thing that happened, Joe Mankiewicz who was a big producer, he went out, stepped in a gopher hole and tore his knee up so bad he had to have surgery and everything, and that kinda took the enthusiasm down considerably. So I don't remember them ever having another game after that, because he was the captain and the instigator of the Twentieth Century Fox team.

PRACTICAL JOKES.

Marian Mack: "In his book, when he made you the butt of some practical joke, that meant you were OK. He'd go to any length to get a laugh, but there was no malice in his practical jokes."

⁸⁶[A close inspection of the scene convinces me Eleanor is right, but make up your own mind.]

In the early twenties we also had a whale of a time for ourselves after working hours playing practical jokes⁸⁷. In this Roscoe and I were aided by Lew Cody, the screen Romeo Syd Chaplin, Charlie's half brother⁸⁸, and other happy-go-lucky confederates. Some of our practical jokes are still rated as classics. First-rate practical jokes, by the way, are far easier to dream up than to execute.

We worked only for laughs. We never used cruel gimmicks that hurt and humiliated people. I mean such things as the hot foot, the electric goosing cane, the 'electric chair', and the bugged boudoir sofas, wired so that every word and sound a love-making couple makes can be heard by their fellow guests in the other rooms of the house.

Our practical jokes were of the sort the victims could laugh at with us later on. They were quite ingenious. This earthy art, by the way, is the subject of much misunderstanding. Really clever practical jokes are impossible to plan and put over on the spur of the moment. They must be plotted as carefully as a movie scenario, but precautions must be taken to protect the gag in the event something goes wrong.

Soon after Joe Schenck sold Arbuckle's contract to Famous Players-Lasky we read in the newspapers that Roscoe's new boss, Adolph Zukor, was about to make his annual trip to Hollywood. During this visit he would inspect the studios, confer with his executives, and discuss the plans for the lot's stars.

On hearing this earth-shaking news, Roscoe wired Mr. Zukor an invitation to dine with him and a small party of other Zukor admirers at the humble Arbuckle home on his first night there. Mr. Zukor promptly wired back: 'Delighted to accept'.

I was cast as the butler. We relied on the theory that no one looks at the butler. I had not yet been starred in a picture. It seemed unlikely that anyone in Mr. Zukor's party would recognize me, even though Frank Newman, the well-known Kansas City exhibitor, was in the group. But as an added precaution there would be only shaded lights in the three downstairs rooms where the guests would have a chance to see me—just in case one of them was the odd type that looks at butlers.

All of the Hollywood people we invited were in on the gag. Among them was Sid Grauman, the builder and operator of the Egyptian and Chinese Theaters in Hollywood, who was himself one of Hollywood's outstanding pranksters. For women guests we had four beautiful screen performers: Bebe Daniels, Viola Dana, Anna Q. Nilsson, and Alice Lake.

Before the dinner Roscoe briefed them. He explained, "Nothing is quite so humiliating as giving away a practical joke to the person who is supposed to be the fall guy. So if something we do breaks you up, turn quickly to the man at your side, and tell him, 'I was just thinking of something that happened at the studio today. It was the funniest thing--' But you must have a really funny story ready, or else he'll think you are silly to be laughing so uproariously at something that, to him, doesn't sound amusing at all."

On the great night, the guests sat down after enjoying several rounds of cocktails. I brought in a tray of shrimp cocktails. Ignoring Roscoe's glaring eyes, I served these to the men, beginning with Mr. Zukor, our guest of honor. The shrimp were very large and luscious looking. Though somewhat embarrassed at being served ahead of the women, a couple of the men could not resist the shrimps and ate one or two.

When I came in with a second platter of shrimps and placed these before the girls, Roscoe was unable to restrain himself. With an embarrassed smile, he apologized to his

⁸⁷[Working hours seem to be 6 Am. to 6 Pm. Monday to Saturday inclusive.]

⁸⁸[And apparently an off-screen Romeo too..]

guests, rose from the table, and followed me out to the butler's pantry. There he yelled loudly enough for them to hear,

"You stupid numbskull, don't you know better than to serve the men first?"

He was hardly back at the table when I was out once more to shift the men's half-eaten shrimps to the women and theirs to the men.

My next appearance was with a stack of soup plates and a silver ladle, which I placed carefully on the table next to Roscoe. But I brought in no soup. Instead, once back in the pantry, I created a terrible din by rattling dozens of knives and forks in a tin washtub, then dropping the whole business on the floor. I also doused myself with water so I'd look as though I'd spilled the consomme all over myself. I went back to the dining room and placidly, explaining nothing, took away the soup plates and ladle.

This put Roscoe into so explosive a rage that Mr. Zukor, from away out in right field (the other end of the long table), leaned forward and said earnestly,

"That is perfectly all right, Roscoe. I never eat soup anyway."

Roscoe refused to be placated by this comforting news. He told his chief, sorrowfully,

"We have a terrible problem here, Mr. Zukor- the servant problem."

Zukor, nodding in agreement, said,

"But, Roscoe, in the East we also find it impossible to find intelligent servants."

At this point I reappeared, carrying ice water in a silver pitcher. As I moved around the table I filled each guest's glass. That is until I got to Bebe Daniels, who was sitting next to Roscoe. I passed her by, and as I was about to pour Roscoe's ice water, Bebe held up her glass, and asked,

"Won't you give me some, please?"

Seemingly bewitched by her beauty, I stared down into her great brown eyes as I poured. I missed her glass but splashed the ice water into Roscoe's face.

With a bellow Roscoe jumped up, grabbed me by the back of the neck, and started to drag me back into the pantry.

"Roscoe, control yourself!" wailed Mr. Zukor. An imaginative man, he could see his great new comedy star bursting a blood vessel before his very eyes.

Arbuckle permitted me to escape. After his guests dried him off he sat down with a hopeless and defeated air in his drenched tuxedo. He resumed the discussion about the terrible servant problem, gradually working himself up into another rage. And nobody could fake anger better than goodhearted Roscoe.

"I am going to give up this house and move into a hotel." he roared, banging on the table.

Willing to say anything to calm him, the flustered Mr. Zukor went the limit. He said he would give up his house in the East and move to a hotel. Then Sid Grauman said, "I think I have the explanation of this man's inept behaviour. A while ago I went to telephone, Roscoe, and I saw him take a manhattan."

Before Roscoe could comment, Zukor purred,

"You see, Roscoe, your butler has entered into the spirit of the occasion."

But now came the piece de resistance of the evening. For this, we had obtained the help of Roscoe's physical trainer.

The piece de resistance was a twenty-four-pound turkey, browned to a turn, and surrounded by artfully arranged sprigs of parsley, potatoes, and sculptured cranberry sauce. I brought it in on a beautiful silver platter.

I showed the Turkey to Roscoe, who nodded and smiled.

"Carve it in the pantry," he said.

At the pantry door I dropped my service napkin. As I bent over to retrieve it, Roscoe's trainer pushed the pantry door, hitting me on the backside and propelling me astride the turkey. I was covered with turkey gravy when I got to my feet. But feeding the guests being the first thing on my mind I lost no time in trying to brush off the crushed and battered turkey with my napkin.

Gurgling with maniacal fury, Roscoe again grabbed me by the neck and hauled me into the pantry. The last view the guests had of me I was still trying to clean off the turkey enough to make it presentable.

Once the door shut Roscoe made an ungodly racket by throwing around dishpans, pots, and knives and forks. Above the din, Roscoe could be heard shouting, "I'll kill you, you damned dumb bastard."

Meanwhile back in the dining room the agitated Mr. Zukor was pleading with Bebe Daniels to go into the pantry to try to calm down the raging fat man.

Then something happened that was not in the script. As Bebe got to the door it was pushed open by Roscoe who wanted the guests to see him brandishing a brandy bottle over my head. It was, of course, a breakaway bottle. We had filled it with tea. When Roscoe smashed this over my head some of the pieces and a good deal of the tea fell on poor Bebe's bosom.

Not knowing what hit her, she screamed. Without waiting to investigate, Roscoe chased me through the back door. There he permitted the guests to catch up with him and stop him from murdering me.

While they were all jabbering and milling around out there, I raced around the house to the front door. I slipped in and tiptoed upstairs where I cleaned up, got into a natty sack suit⁸⁹, and brushed my hair flat. I'd fluffed it up for the butler bit.

Downstairs, Roscoe, having allowed his guests to calm him down once again, was having his real butler (whom he introduced as his chef) serve a second turkey. Luckily, he told his guests, he had had two birds roasted just in case one proved not to be enough. As his servant, wearing a chef's hat and apron, was serving this the phone at Arbuckle's side rang. It was I, phoning from upstairs. He listened to me for a moment, then replied,

"Why yes, Buster. I'm glad you could make it. We have almost finished dinner, but if you come right now you can at least have dessert and coffee with us."

On hanging up, he said,

"That was the little fellow who has been working with me in my pictures. You gentlemen must have seen him. I'm sure you will want to meet him."

Zukor said I was a wonderful performer. Grauman chimed in with,

"He's the rarest kind of actor: the unforgettable type."

I crept down the stairs and out of the house. Once safely on the porch I rang the bell. On joining the party I was introduced to the guests from the East and seated next to Frank Newman, the Kansas City exhibitor, who said,

"You should have been here earlier, Keaton. We had the damndest waiter you ever saw." Then he hesitated and gave me an appraising look. "The odd part is that he looks very much like you." That caused Mr. Zukor to scrutinize me closely. Then he got it but took it dead pan. His eyes moved from me to Roscoe, the back to me. Sid Grauman was the first to laugh. Pointing his finger at Zukor, he said derisively, "Then came the dawn."⁹⁰

⁸⁹[Sack pants, loose fitting trousers...; suit, a man's suit having a sack coat. 2:1439. K.H.M.M.]

⁹⁰[A title card so famous that it became a cliché.]

Zukor didn't smile, just said in an even tone,
"Very clever boys, very clever!"

But he loosened up later when Roscoe took everybody to the Ship Cafe, at Venice, for some drinks. At midnight we all went back to his house for a few snacks.

Next day Zukor surprised us all by telling reporters about the hilarious dinner Roscoe had given him, and the story was printed all over the country. When Zukor got back to New York, his old friend, Marcus Loew, kidded him about being taken in.

"What did you expect to happen, you stupid man?" demanded Loew. "You knew whose house you were going to. You should have expected just such shenanigans from a man like 'Fatty' Arbuckle."⁹¹

When word of this reached us, we decided that such disrespect for our practical jokes must not go unpunished. When Loew made his annual visit to the Coast to inspect his new studio, Roscoe contrived to be on the Metro lot, visiting a friend.

Running into Loew just as he was leaving, Roscoe asked,
"Where are you going from here?"

"To the Alexandria Hotel," replied Mr. Loew, "I'm stopping there."

"What a coincidence!" exclaimed Roscoe. "I am going there right now. Can't I drive you there? My chauffeur is waiting outside."

I, of course, was the chauffeur. I wore livery, a mustache, and goggles. The Alexandria Hotel, then *the* hotel in Los Angeles, was downtown. I drove my passengers straight down to Alvarado Street, where I turned up a street so steep that you could only make it to the top in low gear. And the top- when you got there- was shaped like a whale's back.

I had raced cars so much in our comedy chases that I had become quite an expert at wild crazy driving. But that day I delivered my most masterful exhibition. As we started up the hill in low gear, I raced the motor. The racket this produced convinced Mr. Loew that we were achieving rocketlike speed, though we couldn't have been making more than fifteen or sixteen miles an hour. I did not brake the car until we were straddling the street's whaleback top, from which my passengers and I could look down straight into Silver Lake directly below.

Instead of plunging down, I braked and reversed the car, coming down the hill by another route. Next I gave Mr. Loew a rough ride by taking a short cut through a recently plowed orange grove.

Close by this grove was a street on which there were six trolley-car tracks. The outer tracks on each side were used by the local trolleys, those in the middle by the express interurban cars. The center tracks were reserved for use in rare emergencies.

Needless to say, Roscoe and I had made a careful study of the line's schedule. We had also measured our car and found to our delight that it would just straddle the emergency tracks. This meant that the express cars would narrowly miss our auto's front and rear if I could stall the car in precisely the right position.

About a block from the spot we had selected for our exhilarating little adventure, I started to make the engine cough. This gave Mr. Loew fair warning (even though our harassed guest could not take advantage of it) that our motor might stop dead. This happened just as we got across the middle tracks.

With a disgusted shrug, I got out, lifted the hood. After staring at the motor for some time, I walked to the toolbox and got a whole armful of monkey wrenches,

⁹¹[If Andy Edmonds is correct about the Arbuckle scandal, then probably Zukor resented this joke deeply.]

hammers and other tools and I started to work on the rebellious motor. Roscoe stepped out to help me.

We noticed with satisfaction that the trolleys were right on schedule. First an express car whizzed by at about sixty-five miles an hour, narrowly missing our front end. Next, one headed the other way missed our rear end just as narrowly. Meanwhile on the outer tracks the local trolleys were racing past in both directions at no mean speed. Between one speed-mad trolley and another, Marcus Loew was too nerve-wracked to jump out and run for his life.

Only when we decided he was thoroughly cowed did we get the car started. And en route to the Alexandria I was lucky enough to come across a street which had recently been washed. This enabled me to demonstrate my skill at skidding and turning corners on two wheels.

As we approached the hotel I managed to put the fender and the two left wheels up on the sidewalk. At this Marcus Loew got out of the car so damn fast we missed the chance to ask him how he had enjoyed the ride. Marcus went through the Alexandria's revolving door like a whirling dervish.

Roscoe went up to Loew's suite first. The frightened millionaire, though never much of a drinking man, was putting away his second straight slug of whiskey. When I walked into the suite a few moments later, I took off the chauffeur's cap, goggles, and false mustache. Mr. Loew lashed around for something heavy enough to throw at me.

But after that first tense moment, Marcus Loew started laughing and kept on until he almost became sick.

Some of the great movie queens of that day were also good sports, Pauline Frederick for one. Polly was one of the first of the truly talented Broadway beauties to make her fortune and increase her fame in pictures, playing to great success in such screen melodramas as 'Zaza', 'La Tosca', and 'Madame X'.

Miss Frederick was also the first screen star to build a luxurious home in the Beverly Hills section of Sunset Boulevard. Her mansion stood on an immense lot with a 150-foot front. But Polly's gardeners had endless difficulty in growing the imposing lawn she had set her heart on. The experts she called in blamed it on the heavy amount of alkali and adobe mud in the soil. But after spending many thousands of dollars Polly finally got the velvety lawn she wanted.

Every time Roscoe and I drove past her mansion he called my attention to the progress her landscape gardeners were making.

Soon after their work was completed he called me and Lew Cody to the studio early one Sunday morning and had us put on dirty, old workmen's clothes that we dug out of the studio's wardrobe department. We dumped surveyors instruments, picks, shovels, and other tools in the back of a beat-up old Model-T Ford that we'd been using in our chase sequences, and drove it to Beverly Hills. We parked the Ford in front of Polly's magnificent estate. Before getting out, we pulled our hats down over our foreheads and our bandannas up over our chins. We dumped our equipment in the middle of Miss Frederick's beautiful lawn and prepared to go to work.

We set up a tripod, and Lew measured the ground through the telescope. Meanwhile, Roscoe and I got ready to assault the expensive green scenery with our picks and shovels.

In no time at all Miss Frederick's butler came running out of the house in panic. "What are you men doing?" he demanded.

"We are from the Beverly Hills Gas and Electricity Department." I explained politely. "There is a leak in our gas main somewhere along here. We'll have to dig up this lawn to find it." He was joined, first by Polly's chauffeur and then by her horrified head gardener. The gardener protested that a great fortune had been spent on the lawn we were trying to dig up.

"Oh, we can see that," said Cody, placidly, "but duty is duty. If there was an explosion and that big house of yours was blown up, what would we say to our superintendent?"

The argument was getting heated and noisy when two windows on the mansion's second floor popped open. In another moment, Pauline and her uncle, in dressing gowns, were out on the lawn, pleading with us not to wreck it. Then Polly recognised us. When she stopped laughing she invited us in and served us a breakfast fit for a king.

We enjoyed our little joke so much that we planned to repeat it at Pickfair, the estate of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, which had an even bigger and more expensive lawn. But we were the victims of our own success. The story went all over Hollywood too quickly for us to work it on anyone else.

Our most elaborate practical joke though was played on Vic Levy, a Belgian dress manufacturer who lived in Los Angeles. Vic doted on movie people and had entertained crowds of us at big parties in his home at which he served the best imported wines.

But that was only until prohibition arrived. Against that evil day Vic had stored an immense stock of vintage wines. But he got very stingy with these. He let you look admiringly at the stuff in his cellar but served only bootleg booze and near beer at his parties.⁹²

Roscoe and I developed a persecution complex over this as we had been Vic's most appreciative guests.

We decided to teach him a lesson that would bring him back to his senses- and his hospitable habits.

But we could think of no way to show him his error in becoming so tight with his vintage wine until we read that the King and Queen of his native land were in America and would visit Los Angeles while here. During the war Vic had devoted much time to organizing benefits for the Belgian War Charities, a circumstance that inspired us.

We called in Syd Chaplin as our practical joke consultant. He suggested that stationery from the Belgian Consul's office would prove useful, and got it for us. We wrote a letter to Vic on this stationery, saying that Their Royal Highnesses had expressed a desire to dine incognito in Los Angeles at some prominent Belgian's home.

Because of Mr. Levy's selfless service in raising money for Belgian war sufferers, the consulate went on to explain that, though it was not generally known, the King and Queen had long been great movie fans. If Mr. Levy wished to surprise his Monarch and Queen he would invite their favorites.

Among those we listed as favorites of the King and Queen were the three of us, Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, Lew Cody, Marshall Neilan, Jack Pickford, Norman Kerry. These were all to come with their wives and sweethearts.

The letter went on to say that the King and Queen would fly down from San Francisco and would arrive at a local airport two hours before the time announced in the newspapers. Glowing with pride on getting the letter, Levy did not doubt its

⁹²[Eliot Ness: 'Prohibition was designed to keep people from drinking, but no law is successful unless the majority of the people are in favor of it. I don't know how the prohibition law was ever passed but that wasn't my concern. ...the attitude of the general public [was] that drinking in the Prohibition Era was a minor violation bordering on a lark.']

authenticity for an instant. Our next task was to produce a fake King and Queen. Going through the casting book we found a man and woman who were dead ringers for the Belgian rulers. We rented costumes for them from the Western Costume Company. For our phony King we got a duplicate of the Army uniform which he wore on all public appearances. For the fake Queen we got the Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and fantastic hats the Belgian Queen, like all European Queens, then wore-apparently to outdo Queen Mary of Great Britain.

For many days Vic abandoned his business affairs to take personal charge of the preparations for the gala party. He decided that his own cook would not do and borrowed a chef from the Jonathon Club for that one evening. He hired a Russian string orchestra to play during dinner, a maid, and a couple of extra butlers. He also chartered a limousine, attended by a chauffeur and footman, to carry our imposters from the airfield to his home. Our imposters took off in a plane from Burbank and landed at the Chaplin Field in Los Angeles, which is only a few minutes away. We had a dozen motorcycle cops on hand and four 'Los Angeles police detectives' (really movie extras) to pose as bodyguards.

On arriving we found that Vic had decorated his house with acres of flowers and crossed Belgian and American flags.

It was the most elegant dinner and beautifully served, with a different wine with each course. Rare old 100-year-old Napoleon brandy and liqueurs almost as ancient were brought in with the coffee.

We cutups and cute kids only had one bad moment during that unforgettable meal. This came when the host leaned toward His Highness and said something in French. But the extra man who was playing king for a night saved the gag. He had the presence of mind to say that while he was in a foreign land he preferred to speak the language of that country.

The whole thing was so beautifully done that no one told Vic the real story. And when he heard three months later how he had been hoaxed he refused to believe it. It was months more before he accepted the true story. On finding out who the main conspirators were and why he had been deceived, he laughed, and from then on, each time we were his guests, we were served only the very best stuff in his cellar.

Like everyone else in the slapstick industry, the gagmen's favorite sport was playing practical jokes. They enjoyed best, of course, those they worked on other gagmen. They never tired of discussing the more successful ones, like the ordeal Lex Neal, my old drinking pal from Muskegon, was put through when he bought a house. Some time before I had added Lex, who had been working in vaudeville as a song-and-dance man, to my writing staff. He worked out fine with us as a combination gagman, story constructionist, and title writer.

Though a bachelor, Lex had the yearning of most hard-travelled vaudevillians for a home of his own. After extensive searching Lex found a \$10,000 house he liked on the outskirts of Beverly Hills. He had saved up little money of his own, but I advanced him some, and a Los Angeles bank loaned him the rest.

As the deal was being closed, Lex could talk of little else but the haven he had found for himself and what it would mean to him to putter around in his garden of a Sunday morning and be able to say to himself, "This is mine, By God! Mine!" He brought his friends out to see the house and was hurt if all of them didn't rave about it.

The day he moved in Lex gave a housewarming for his friends. The following morning Lex could talk of nothing but his home and his plans for changing and

improving it. The houses on his street were similar, though not identical, and Lex thought a few little touches here and there would give it a quite different look. Little did he dream that Johnny Gray, a gag writer at Harold Lloyd's studio, was even then changing the look of his house by planting trees and bushes in front of it.

Lex could hardly wait until quitting time to start for home. He was quite irritated when he got a last minute invitation to a cocktail party. When he tried to beg off, the caller insisted and acted as though he would be insulted and deeply hurt if Lex didn't show up. I heard later that Lex was restless at the party and left after having only two or three drinks.

But when he finally got to his street he could not find his house. It was as though somebody had whisked it away during the night. He was unable to remember the exact address and searched his pockets hoping to find a scrap of paper on which he had written it down- but in vain.

Driving slowly up and down the street, over and over again, Lex stopped before each house and studied it carefully. But before very long he became aware that women and children in each house were watching every move he made. It was obvious that his mysterious behaviour was alarming them. He became apprehensive that they might telephone the police.

Not knowing what else to do he drove to my house and in some embarrassment and told me the story.

"Now what am I to do?" he asked. "My clothes are all in the house. I haven't even got a place to sleep tonight."

I suggested he stay over with me.

"In the morning," I said, "you can call up the bank and get the address from them."

Lex didn't sleep much. Neither did I. All night I could hear him prowling up and down in the guest room. And how he hated to call up Mr. Frost at the bank the next day! But he finally did.

"Mr. Frost," he said, "do you remember that house you loaned me a few thousand dollars on last week?" he paused while Mr. Frost replied, then, "I've lost the address, Mr. Frost. Could you give it to me?"

After another pause, Lex scribbled something on a piece of paper.

"Thanks, Mr. Frost," he said. But on hanging up and turning to me, he murmured, "Cheerful guy, that Mr. Frost. Wasn't even surprised. You'd think the people he lends money to mislaid their houses every day. I would never put much money in that institution. The people who run it are too frivolous."

I went with him to the address he had been given. It was easy to see why Lex had been unable to identify it. Someone had planted bushes and trees about ten feet tall all over the front yard. Six trees lined the little stone walk leading to the door, three on each side. There were two big bushes in front of the house and two more along the curb.

By then poor Lex was so rattled that he could not quite believe it was his house until he unlocked the door and saw his own furniture inside. I told him to relax, if he could, for a few hours before coming down to the studio.

Later when Lex reproached Johnny Gray he got no satisfaction at all.

Johnny pretended to be deeply offended.

"That's the thanks I get from you," he said. "You are as ungrateful as all of my poor relatives put together. I spend a small fortune improving your property. And all I get for it is abuse."

They usually worked six days a week so when they got time off they used it. They used to go to San Francisco several times a year to play. One day in a hotel Buster took his shoes off and went out and scraped them around on the window sill to get them dirty, then he did a hand-in-hand with Roscoe, where Buster stood upside down in Roscoe's hands. He walked up the wall, across the ceiling and then down the other wall leaving shoe prints all around the room to look like someone had actually walked the walls. They did it just to drive the help crazy, just a sudden inspiration they had, just in fun. The maid came in and sees, or they called her in and complained, something. Just something to do to pass the time and have fun.

Equally somebody has to clean it up..

Oh, they always left *enormous* tips. There was never any problem about that. They never did nasty things, that was fun for them, but they also made sure that whoever had to clean up the mess was taken care of.

When I said that everybody in the slapstick movie business played jokes on everybody else I was being conservative. I should have included props which never acted the same way twice when the camera's eye was on them.

Animals were even worse, being both temperamental and unpredictable. Even the more tranquil and seemingly well-adjusted mammoth beasts got capricious and flighty the minute you pointed a camera at one of them. Of course, you never could be quite sure the trainer who rented the beasts to you on a daily basis was not responsible. After all, the longer it took to shoot the scenes his animals were in the more money he made.

The director of one of the Tarzan films once told me the sad story of what happened when he rented three hippos from a local zoo and had the trainer swim them into a lake. The monstrous beasts promptly disappeared. The director asked, "Are they trying to commit suicide?"

"Oh," said the trainer, "I forgot to warn you that sometimes they dive to the bottom of a body of water like this. They love the mud at the bottom, you know, and bury themselves in it."

"For how long?" asked the director.

"Oh, just for a few days. They have to come up finally to breathe, you know."

Holding his head, the director asked,

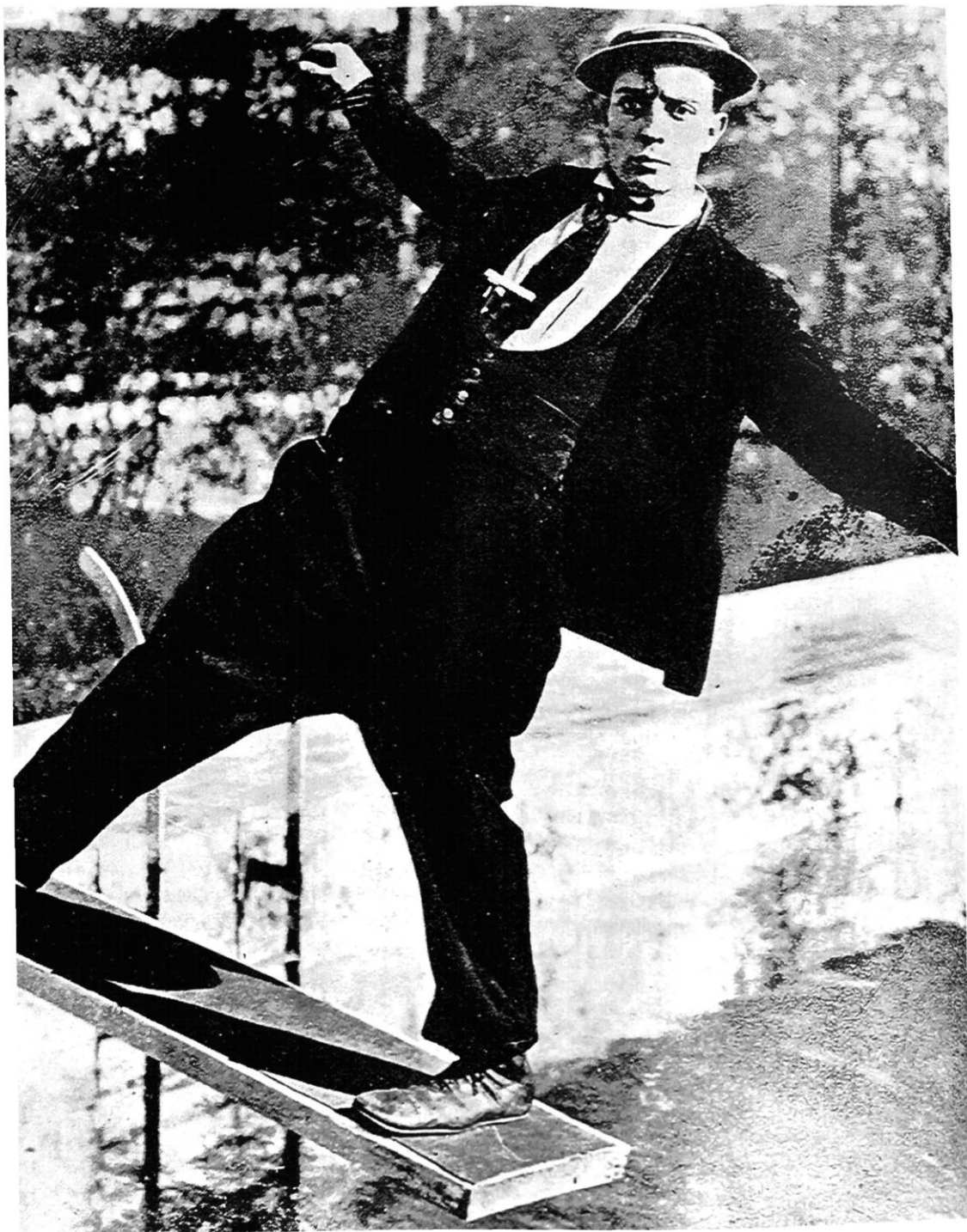
"Is there anything we can do to make them come up?"

"Well, if you disturb the mud enough they become irritated and rise to the surface."

The director thereupon sent several jittery members of his crew out with long poles to stir up the mud at the lake's bottom. The boys didn't seem too energetic. One of them said later,

"The last thing in my life I want to do is irritate a herd of hippos."

In any event, nothing happened, and the whole company and crew sat at the lakeside for four days until the hippos finished their mud bath and came to the surface.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

My own studio.

1919-21. High Sign. Work/Play.

I loved having my own studio. Schenck and Anger very seldom interfered with me. Neither did Metro which released my first two-reelers. I was able to supervise each phase of my pictures. Movie making was a very informal business in those days. When the boss walked into a studio the carpenter and the electrician would call him by his first name. I'm liable to go to Mr. Schenck's house and there'd be the assistant cameraman, invited to the party.

The greatest thing about working in a small studio like ours was having the same bunch of men going with me as a team on each new movie. The director, two or three writers, and myself would figure out the story. But the others- the prop man, the unit manager who found our locations, the two cameramen, and the cutter- all sat in with us. Because we worked this way each man in the crew knew what would be required of his department, thereby eliminating much of the fantastic waste of time, energy, and money that later went on in the big studios.

Two cameramen were necessary in those days, by the way, because we shot everything with two cameras placed side by side; one taking the home negative for the American market, and one the foreign negative, for the market abroad. After the first American print had been cut, edited, previewed, furnished with subtitles, and was ready for release, the European negative was matched to it and shipped abroad where titles and subtitles were translated into the various foreign languages.

Even when making my two-reelers I worked on the theory that the story was always of the first importance. But one thing we never did when making our silent comedies was put the story down on paper. On the other hand I never would agree to start shooting until I had in my mind a satisfactory ending for a story. The beginning was easy, and the middle took care of itself, I knew I could depend on my writers and myself to come up with any gags we might need as we went along.

The daily story conferences at the studio usually lasted from ten to six. We worked a six-day week then, but I never was such a bear cat for work that I couldn't take time off on a Saturday afternoon to see any big football games.

What I never could understand was why I got so few good ideas during those long story conferences. My best notions would invariably occur to me at home, more often than not in the least inspiring room in the house, the bathroom. But I also never went fishing without coming back with a brand-new story idea. A good comedy story can be written on a penny postcard.

The cast for our two-reelers was always small. There were usually three principals- the villain, myself, and the girl, and she was never important. She was there so the villain and I would have something to fight about.

The leading lady had to be fairly good-looking, and it helped some if she had a little acting ability. As far as I was concerned I didn't insist that she have a sense of humor. There was always the danger that such a girl would laugh at a gag in the middle of a scene, which meant ruining it and having to remake it.

If my studio manager could get a leading lady cheap, he did it. He just didn't consider it important.

You [the editor] talk about Buster having a cheapskate approach to hiring female leads.

That was Joe Schenck's idea. Joe Schenck never would let him hire anybody with any particular talent. He said Buster didn't need a leading lady because she was only a prop, and it wouldn't make any difference whether she could act, so why waste money? Because they cost more of course, and he'd maintain Buster didn't need them, after all, they were just a living prop, a sweet-young-thing-girlfriend anyway. Most of the leading ladies were pretty much dud.

Buster begged and pleaded to get a good leading lady once in a while, and he says he never really did.

So the heroine wasn't important but a low price was?

That was not his opinion, because he begged and pleaded to do a film with Constance Talmadge, because Constance was the Lucille Ball of her era, and also was his and Joe Schenck's sister-in-law. She was under contract to Joe too.

Joe wouldn't do it, he says

"You can't put two stars in one picture." In those days you could not put two stars in one picture, so he wouldn't give in. Buster never got his way on that. He just wanted to work with her, he didn't care what they did, if they stood and read the telephone book it would have been all right with him.

So I had a city block there, a good-size lot, for my studio. We had all the room in the world for one company. Of course, we used location an awful lot.

On location, your big problem is people. People standing watching, getting in the way. But we didn't have so much trouble. If we were going to be in a congested section, we'd always tell the police department. They'd send down two or three motorcycle cops to control traffic, or do whatever we needed. We never actually paid them for this, but we used to give them an extra's check or a stunt check. That was probably ten dollars, or something like that. If we wanted the fire department, they'd say,

"Which one do you want?" We went down, told them what we wanted, and they sent them out on a call.

It cost us nothing. Never did.

None of our railroad things ever cost us anything. The Santa Fe people were tickled to death to see SANTA FE on the screen. It was on their boxcars, on their engines, on everything. They were perfectly satisfied. You can't get cheaper advertising than that!

Brownlow: The Keaton company comprised director Eddie Cline, who co-directed with Buster Keaton, and a nucleus of three gag men. Jean Havez and Clyde Bruckman were Keaton's favorites. Havez, a genial fat man who looked like Roscoe Arbuckle, used to write shows for Kolb and Dill. He composed the song, 'Everybody Works but Father'.

Clyde Bruckman was one of the best gag men in the business. When Keaton credited him for the co-direction of one of his pictures, he was signed up by Harold Lloyd. In fact, he had had no directorial experience at all, and the responsibility of his new job unnerved him. On top of this, marital troubles led him to drink.

Other gag men on the Keaton company included Joseph A. Mitchell, who came from a background of vaudeville and the legitimate stage, and Thomas Grey, who had written for The Greenwich Village Follies and Music Box Revues.

Later, Keaton tried Robert E. Sherwood, Al Boasberg, Carl Harbaugh, and other important writers. He found them all unsuitable for silent comedy work.

The chief technical man was Fred Gabourie [after the first 'Electric House'.], responsible for set building and special effects. His

achievements with the Keaton comedies were to make him one of the most sought-after technicians in the business. The studio head was Lou Anger, officially the production manager. But most of the time Gabourie filled this role. Bert Jackson was the property man, Denver Harmon the chief electrician. Elgin Lessley was first cameraman, Byron Houck, former baseball player with the Philadelphia Athletics, was second cameraman. Bert Haines was camera assistant. Later, Devereaux Jennings joined as a first cameraman.

One reason I never took extravagant praise seriously was because neither I, my director, nor my gagmen were writers in any literary sense. The writers most often on my staff were Clyde Bruckman, Joe Mitchell, and Jean Havez. They never wrote anything but gags, vaudeville sketches, and songs. I don't think any of them ever had his name on a book, a short story, or even an article in a fan magazine, entitled, 'How to Write Gags for the Movies'. They were not word guys, at all. They didn't have to be. The only words we had to write were for the title and subtitles. The fewer subtitles we used the better it was for the picture. What made audiences laugh at our silent comedies was what they watched happening on the screen. The sight gags we used served to bring out the absurdity of things, people's actions, the preposterous situations the movie characters got into and had to escape. In fact everybody in our staff- that went for the assistant prop man, the assistant director, the cameraman, they were all gag men- you couldn't stop that...

Leo McCarey: In the 1920's "...all of us tried to steal each other's gagmen, but we had no luck with Keaton because he thought up his best gags himself and we couldn't steal him!"

Number one, I was practically my own producer on all those silent pictures. I used a co-director on some of them, but the majority I did alone. So you always chose your own camera shots?

I always chose the actual camera set-ups myself when it was important for the scene I was going to do. If I had an incidental scene- someone runs in, say, and says, 'here, you've got to go and do this'- the background wasn't important. Then I generally just told the cameraman that I had these two characters in the scene, two full-length figures, and asked him to pick a good-looking background. He would go by the sun. He'd say,

"I like that back crosslight coming in through the trees. There are clouds over there right now, so if we hurry up we can still get them before they disappear." So I would say "Swell." and go and direct the scene in front of the cameraman's set-up. We took pains to get good-looking scenery whenever we possibly could, no matter what we were shooting.

I was not always the director, or the sole director, of my films. But I worked actively on elaborating the scenarios and selecting the gags and that's why all my films have, I believe, a family resemblance. When I worked with a co-director he stayed beside the camera and followed the shooting of the scene, all the details of which we had first worked out carefully together, and told me later if everything had gone as planned or if, somewhere in the background, without my knowledge, something had gone badly. Eddie Cline co-directed most of the two-reelers with me. He would co-direct with me, that's all. He would be out there looking through the camera, and I'd ask him what he thought. He would maybe say 'that scene looks a little slow'; and then I'd do it again and speed it up. As a rule, when I'm working alone, the cameraman, the prop man, the electrician, these are my eyes out there. I'd ask,

"Did that work the way I wanted it to?" and they'd say yes or no. They knew what they were talking about.

And I cut them all myself: I cut all my own pictures. I first began to edit my films myself when I began to shoot my films myself. Arbuckle taught me how to edit.

One Week not only established the gag formula which the subsequent Keatons were to follow, it also established their technique. The simple setups, the flat comedy lighting, the spare use of titles- and the overall excellence of the direction. Buster Keaton gave credit to co-director Eddie Cline, but there can be no doubt where the responsibility lay for the final result. Cline was a successful comedy director in later years, but few of his films have the panache of these early Keatons. In retrospect, Buster Keaton was probably the best comedy director in the business. Chaplin's use of film was pedestrian by comparison.

Keaton was also an intuitively brilliant editor. He said he learned how to cut by experience. But in 1920, he could have had very little experience. Keaton thought about this.

"Yeah... well, I don't know- "

Mrs. Keaton suggested that perhaps the timing of actors gave him skill enough to be able to pace comedy. Keaton agreed.

I was a veteran before I went into pictures. I was twenty-one years old by then. I made my first picture when I was twenty-five. Pacing- for fast action, you cut things closer than normal. For a dramatic scene, you lengthen them out a little bit more. Once we've seen the scene on the screen, we know what to do.

J. Sherman Kell was my cutter. Father Sherman, we called him. He looked like a priest. He broke the film down and put it in the racks. We get in the cutting room and run down to where the action is.

"There- as he goes out that door, rip it. That's it."

Give him the next shot.

"Get it down to where he's just coming through the door." Get the two spliced together. We didn't have regular Moviolas. We had machines with little cranks, but they were a nuisance. I'd say,

"Give me that long shot of the ballroom." He'd get that out.

"Give me the close-up now of the butler announcing the arrival of his lordship."

As I cut them, he's there splicing them together. Running them onto a reel as fast as I hand them to him. There was quite a fire risk in those days, with nitrate film, but we never paid any attention to it. If a match got near one of those films, brother, it went up fast....

There was one big advantage in those days, when you owned your own studio, and you were the only company in there. The skeleton of your outfit- that's your technical man, your head cameraman and his assistant, your prop man, your head electrician- these people are all on salary with you for fifty-two weeks of the year. So if I'm sitting in the cutting room, and the picture's been finished, and I want an extra shot, I can do it. If I want to take a sequence out- 'if I turned to the left in that alley there I could drop this whole sequence and pick it up right here'- we can get the cameras out that afternoon and go back to the alley and shoot it. Now to do that would cost me the gasoline of the car we owned, and the amount of film we bought from Eastman to put in the camera to take it. Which, when it's all added up, means about two dollars and thirty-nine cents.

You try that at any major studio today,⁹³ and I'll tell you the least you could get that scene for would be around twelve thousand dollars. Just to go out and grab that scene

⁹³[1968 publication]

and get back. Because everything is rented. Everything. And of course you don't move a company today, but the union forces you to take so many prop men, so many make-up men... this has to go, that has to go... the dressing room truck goes... the commissary truck goes.

Films *The High Sign*. Rejects it.

Molly Haskell. 'In their films, built around a romantic female image, Chaplin and Keaton both illuminate the love-hate feelings that lie dormant in most men and show the progression from one to the other. For the idealist to turn misogynist, the princess must turn shrew, a metamorphosis that, for both Chaplin and Keaton, was conveniently represented by the transformation of a woman from sweetheart to wife. Misogyny was cloaked in the acceptably American and automatically comic form of misogamy, the hatred of marriage and, by extension, the wife.'

James Agee: 'In the language of screen comedians four of the main grades of laugh are the titter, the yowl, the bellylaugh, and the boffo. The titter is just a titter. The yowl is a runaway titter. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure knows all about a bellylaugh. The boffo is the laugh that kills. An ideally good gag, perfectly constructed and played, would bring the victim up this ladder of laughs by cruelly controlled degrees to the top rung, and would then proceed to wobble, shake, wave and brandish the ladder until he groaned for mercy. Then, after the shortest possible time out for recuperation, he would feel the first wicked tickling of the comedian's whip once more and start up a new ladder. The reader can get a fair enough idea of the current state of screen comedy by asking himself how long it has been since he has had that treatment....'

A preview audience also told me when something might be added to help a picture. That proved to be the case with *The High Sign*. In that screwball comedy two-reeler I played the owner of a shooting gallery who is a brilliant shot. In it I seem to hit bulls-eyes, firing over my shoulder, standing on my head, and from a variety of other difficult positions. A man whose life is threatened by the Mafia, or the Black Hand or something, [*The Blinking Buzzards*] finds out about this and hires me to protect him.

But the Mafia, also admiring my marksmanship, force me to join their secret organization against my will. As my first assignment they order me to kill the man who has just hired me to protect him from them.

So we do a simple scene in *The High Sign*, there's a street with a corner and a guy goes by eating a banana and drops the banana peel. Then I come on the other way, turn the corner and walk into the camera. When the audience saw me approaching, everyone knows that I'm going to slip on the banana peel- only I don't. I walk right over the peel and I tried to get my laugh by using the Mafia's secret sign, thumbs held crossed under the nose with the hands spread out on both sides of the face, into the camera. But this was like thumbing my nose at the audience, and saying, 'Fooled you that time, didn't I?'

Okay, so we preview the picture. The scene doesn't get a titter. Not a titter and nobody can figure out why. Finally I get the idea, I decided that I had made the mistake of outsmarting the audience a little too much. But instead of cutting this scene out I added a shot. We go back and do it exactly the same, only this time, after I walk over the banana peel and into the camera, giving the high sign, the camera follows me and I slip on a second dropped banana peel that I haven't seen, and down I go. That worked fine. Yaks. They don't like it when a comic is smarter than the audience. The audience wants his comic to be human, not clever.

Bartine Burkett, leading Lady of High Sign, characterised by herself as "... a shining example of a nice girl."

"We'd be right in the middle of a take and he'd think of something funny, and then he'd laugh and ruin the take and we'd have to do it over again. But he laughed at everything very easily and it was hard for him to be so solemn.

Buster used to come and take me to the Hollywood Hotel to a dance every thursday night. Buster would take my [dance] card and fill it. He didn't dance with me because he wanted to go upstairs to Viola Dana's room where they were having parties, and he knew that wasn't for me. So he would fill my card and if anyone showed a lack of enthusiasm for dancing with me, he would say,

"Aw, come on. She's not a *bad* dancer."

and embarrass me to death.

One day he called me and asked me if I'd like to go down and meet Roscoe. I always wanted to go wherever Buster did- it was fun to be with him. I said,

"Sure." So we went down to the station and Mr. Arbuckle came and there were quite a few people down there. When we left the station we weren't going in the direction of Hollywood and I said,

"Where're you going, Buster?" He said,

"Well, I'm going out to Arbuckle's house, but it's not for you."

I said,

"What am I going to do?"

"Well, you're going to go home."

I said,

"How am I going to get there?"

"Take the car."

"Buster! I don't know how to drive a car." He said

"Oh, that's all right. It's easy. I'll teach you."

[They stopped in front of Arbuckle's house.]

"Now this is low gear and this is second gear and this is third. Here's the brake pedal right over here. You'll get along all right, kid. See you in the morning."

[So she learned to drive.]

Dissatisfied, Buster shelves his first solo film attempt, and takes a holiday in Lone Pine where Arbuckle was filming 'The Round Up'.

Right after The Saphead, I was up hunting in Lone Pine, on the edge of the Mojave Desert. It's good quail country, and I went up there to shoot. And there's Arbuckle on location.

The minute we showed up, Arbuckle, without even saying hello, shouted,

"Buster, come here and get shot."

Now I had no connection with the picture- it was Paramount- but they had a scene to make and Arbuckle said,

"Put make-up on Keaton and let me shoot him."

Arbuckle's director, George Melford, called,

"Cut! stand by, everyone".

"You'll be an indian." said Arbuckle.

"Okay, okay," I said, "but wait a sec till I give Dad and Jingles the guns. We want pheasant for supper."

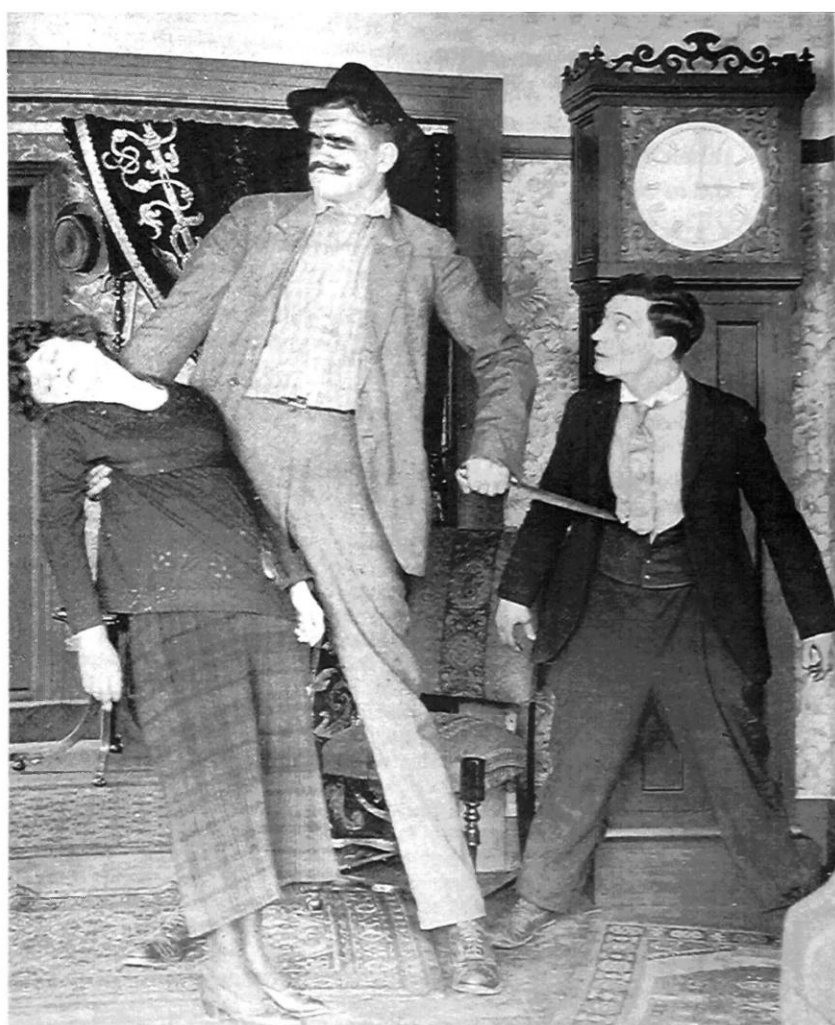
Ten minutes later I reported in costume to makeup.

"Now," I said, "I'll give you a redskin biting the dust until he chokes on it. Fifteen bucks- stunt man's pay."

Melford laughed.

"Seven fifty."

"Okay," I said, "I do it as a half-breed." I turned to the cameraman. "Pan fast or you'll lose me."



The High Sign.



ROSCOE ARBUCKLE IN
"THE ROUND UP"

They put the camera shooting over Arbuckle's head so you could see him take aim and shoot... and when he shot, I died. I was going at top speed, and when he hit me I sailed through the air and then plowed the dirt- right over a fifty-foot cliff. Ever see a rabbit hit in the back of the head- what it does to him? Well, that's what it looked like it did to me.

The silly part of it was my mother, living in Muskegon, Michigan, went to see it because she liked Arbuckle, and remembered the show from Broadway. When that indian died on the screen, she said, "That's Buster." How in God's name she could pick me, I don't know. No-one told her I was in the picture, and I never thought of writing. It was a long shot of an indian. But she knew it was me. "Nobody else could do that." she said.⁹⁴

Bruckman, previously a newspaperman, was with Keaton for years, then later directed Harold Lloyd and W.C.Fields.

"I was with Warner Brothers; Warners at that time consisted of Jack, Sam, and Harry Warner, Monte Banks, and a few extras and props, in an old barn of a studio at Bronson and Sunset, where the big bowling alley now is.

Then I ran into Harry Brand, an old friend of mine from newspaper days. Now he was Buster's publicity man.

"Why don't you come over with Keaton?" he asked.

"How do I know Keaton wants me?"

Next day Brand phoned, said,

"Come over for lunch with us."

I did and was hired, to start the next monday. I went back and saw Jack Warner.

"Jack, I have a chance to go with Keaton- better job, better opportunity. I'd like to close Saturday."

"Can you keep a little secret?" said Jack. "We're all closing Saturday."

And, by gosh, they did- for six months or more. It took a German police dog called Rin Tin Tin to take them out of the red.

I suppose writers should coin phrases, so here goes. We were one .big happy family. And that's something you don't know until- and if- you've been in one. In such a situation, gags are never a problem. You feel good. Your mind's at ease, and working.

I was at Buster's house or he at mine four or five nights many a week- playing cards, horsing around, dodging the issue.

Then, at midnight, to the kitchen, sit on the sink, eat hamburgers, and work on gags until three in the morning. And how we'd work!

You can't match that today, when you walk in on a supervised production, cut and dried, every cough scripted and every sneeze timed, and the bigwigs all a push button's length from the set.

Joe Schenck said- and I've heard him-

"Tell me from nothing. Go ahead, what should I know about comedy?"

Buster was a guy you worked with- not for. Oh, sure, it's a cliché, like the 'happy family'. But try it sometime. I even hate to mention the playing. It sounds like a buildup. But late afternoons we chose sides and had our ball game- fights, arguments. And we made pictures. Harold Lloyd was wonderful to me, so was Bill [W.C.] Fields. But with Bus you belonged.

Well, it's all changed, anyway. So organized and big a man can't touch it. It used to be our business. We acted in scenes, set up scenery, spotted lights, moved furniture- hell, today even the set dresser with paid-up dues can't move a lousy bouquet. He sits and waits until the 'green man' arrives. An actor has to fight his way

⁹⁴["...and I never thought of writing." So far I have not located a single example of Buster's handwriting, not even a signature. He says things like, "send a telegram, sign my name." I presume that Buster's shyness about his education is the reason for this, and also presume that it makes examples of his script rare and valuable.]

onto the set through technicians, supervisors, experts, and accountants. And television has followed the same lines. So.... Other days, other ways, as Nero said.

Oh, we'd get hung up on sequences. Throw down your pencils, pick up the bats. The second, maybe third, inning- with a runner on base- Bus would throw his glove in the air, holler,

"I got it!"

and back to work. He always said,

"Nothing like baseball to take your mind off your troubles."

With it all, you wouldn't believe a comedian could be so serious. He showed them all how to underact. He could tell his story by lifting an eyebrow. He could tell it by not lifting an eyebrow. Buster was his own best gagman. He had judgement, taste; never overdid it, and never offended. He knew what was right for him.

You seldom saw his name on the story credits. But I can tell you- and so could Jean Havez if he were alive- that those wonderful stories were ninety percent Buster's. I was often ashamed to take the money, much less the credit. I would say so.

Bus would say,

"Stick, I need a left fielder." and laugh.

But he never left you in left field. We were all overpaid from the strict creative point of view. Most of the direction was his, as Eddie Cline will tell you. Keaton could have graduated into a top director- of any kind of picture, short or long, high or low, sad or funny or both- if Hollywood hadn't pushed him down and then said

'Look how Keaton has slipped!'

Comedian, gagman, writer, director- then add technical innovator, Camera work. Look at his pictures to see beautiful shots, wide pans and long shots, unexpected close-ups, and angles that were all new when he thought them up.⁹⁵ But each and every camera angle calculated to help tell the story- without sound, remember, and with damn few subtitles.

Let me tell you this, and the dates will prove it: Buster Keaton was the first to film comedy at standard speed. Remember the old rushing, jerky Keystone comedies? They were filmed at slow speed- which does the opposite when projected on the screen, that is, speeds the action up. They thought it was funnier,- and it saved film. But no undercranking for Buster. He said,

"The unnatural tempo makes the action unbelievable. Besides it wrecks the gag timing."

So Keaton used standard speed right from the start with his own outfit. After his first release Chaplin and Lloyd followed suit. No matter what anyone may claim, Bus was first. I was there. [See appendix.]

Camera speed was only one thing. The guy's honesty was impressive. He wouldn't fool his audience. None of the easy camera tricks like cutting an action into several parts with a new camera angle for each, then splicing it all together. [See Three Ages.] Clyde Bruckman.



⁹⁵[And especially travelling shots.]

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

Two-reelers.

1921. One Week. Convict 13. Scarecrow. Neighbours. Haunted House. Hard Luck. Goat. Cartoon gags. Broken leg. Electric House.

SEPTEMBER. ONE WEEK.

Was there any single film, perhaps one of your shorts, that you think did most for your reputation?

Perhaps the first two-reeler I starred in.⁹⁶ It was called One Week- a mild travesty of Elinor Glyn's 'Three Weeks'- only one-third as shocking. It was a very big laughing picture. Sybil Seely was the leading lady. She was an unknown.⁹⁷

The whole picture, except the opening scene which showed me getting married, was built around my efforts to put together the portable home I got as a wedding present. My uncle gave me the portable house, and my aunt gave me the lot to build it on. My former rival for the girl's hand, enraged at losing the girl to me, switched the numbers on the crates containing the various sections of our love nest. So when I put the house up it was the darndest looking thing you ever saw. Every part of it was in the wrong place. The front door, for example, was on the second floor, there were no steps, and anyone walking through it would fall straight down into the garden.

And then for a finish I found out I'd built it on the wrong lot. The villain, had also revenged himself by changing the number of my lot, which tricked me into putting up the house on someone else's property.

I always wanted an audience to outguess me, and then I'd double cross them.

I had a pretty bad scare while making One Week. As a downstairs door had managed to get upstairs, this gave me the chance to make a sensational fall. I, thinking I was walking into the garden, walked through it and dropped many feet.

To lessen the impact we dug a deep, very wide hole in the garden, filled this with straw, and replaced the squares of sod on top of the straw. The lawn looked solid but collapsed like paper when I fell on it. I only felt a jar at the time. It was about two hours before quitting time, and I finished out the day.

But as I was getting dressed I discovered that my left elbow had swelled to double its normal size. I could not even get my jacket on. My other elbow, my back, and both arms were also swelling up fast.

Al Gilmore, my unit's physical trainer, put me under a shower with the water as hot as I could stand. He kept me there for fifteen minutes, then got me under an ice-cold shower for almost as long. When I was dry he rubbed me down with olive oil. That was to prevent the horse liniment, which he applied next, from taking my skin off. Under this treatment the swelling went down little by little. When I was dressed for home, Al told me,

"Get a good night's sleep. You will not need any extra blankets. That horse liniment will keep you warm." Al was right.

Motion Picture World hailed One Week as 'the comedy sensation of the year,' predicting that Buster, 'graduating from vaudeville,' would 'reach the peaks of funmaking. He begins where other comedians leave off. His brand new gags will set movie goers laughing until (if they wear 'em) their false teeth will drop out and their waistbands will shimmy.'

⁹⁶[The first released.]

⁹⁷[As were nearly all Buster's leading ladies.]



Even at this time the moving-picture comedy was getting to be more legitimate, logical and consistent; and the people were more human and less like the heroes of the comic strips. They were beginning to put things on the screen because they arose from the situation, as in stage plays, and not because they were supposed to be independently funny, or because certain properties that could be used happened to be at hand.

I was not in the films in the early custard-pie era, nor was I in the comedies that were wholly without logical development. I remember one old film in which there suddenly flashed across the screen a title: 'Then he went to London'. There was no occasion in the story why he should go to London, and no one knew who he was, except that he was the principal figure employed in putting over the comedy. The only possible reason for this journey was that they happened to have around the studio an English joke or gag which they thought would prove irresistible on the screen.

Out here, in the making of comedies, we talk much about gags. A gag in a comedy is what they call a piece of business in the theater. It is the handling of a property. It is not like a situation which arises out of the action, though it may help the action. Sometimes we'd work out a gag in advance; other times, it would work itself out as we went along.

In those days we didn't use miniatures or process shots. The way a thing looked on the screen was the way you'd done it.

OCTOBER. CONVICT 13.

I'd get with a few writers, about three of them, and we'd sit down and work until we'd got something we thought would make a story. And the minute somebody came up with an idea, something we liked, we'd say, "That's a fine start, now what's the finish?"

We skip the middle. We never worried about the middle, we always figured it would take care of itself.

We immediately went to work on the finish, how to round that out, and when we found a strong finish that we're all satisfied with, *then* we went back and worked on the middle. For some reason, the middle always took care of itself.

By the time we were ready to start a picture, everyone on the lot knew what we've been talking about, so we never had anything on paper. There wasn't even a shooting script. Neither Chaplin, Lloyd, nor myself, even when we got to feature-length pictures, ever had a script.

Anita Loos: 'We never used to refer to a script as a 'screenplay'; the term we used was 'continuity'. A producer might stop me as I was trying to sneak out of the studio to join cronies and say, "Don't let me catch you in that saloon with Buster Keaton until you've turned in your continuity."'

Then we'd go ahead with the movie. We didn't rush. When we thought we had what we wanted, we went ahead and ordered the sets built. When it came to properties I'd tell the man- a row of houses there, a cabin, or whatever- and he'd go off and make them. I didn't have any fixed acting company, but we had ensemble playing: if any ideas came up while we were shooting, fine, we'd use them. It was flexible.



NOVEMBER. THE SCARECROW.

Luke [Arbuckle's wonder dog] was a Staffordshire Bull Terrier. You will see him in two or three of the films, Buster used Luke as well as Arbuckle. He was very well trained, easy to work with. He was featured in one of Buster's films that Arbuckle had nothing to do with, he just borrowed Luke to be in the movie.

Around christmas, 1920, a motion-picture trade journal reported: 'Without parallel... is the phenomenal rise of Buster Keaton. In many parts of the country exhibitors make Keaton the whole show for a week, playing the Keaton feature along with a Keaton comic two-reeler. The Saphead and The Scarecrow are teamed.'

DECEMBER. NEIGHBORS.

An on-the-scenes report by a newspaper critic describes Neighbors. 'Fastest and funniest of them all. What Buster does on that fence, over that fence, through that fence, and on the clothes line and telegraph poles...is so laugh provoking that the Board of Reviews and other 'professionals' in the Metro projection room voiced their appreciation in one long continuous yell.'

<1921.>

FEBRUARY. THE HAUNTED HOUSE.⁹⁸

I got the nickname frozen face, blank pan, hole in the doughnut, oh, I had some beautiful names.

His crew used to call him 'The Little Iron Man'.

MARCH. HARD LUCK. *?

Which of the two-reel shorts was your favorite?

A picture called Hard Luck. It was the biggest laughing two-reeler I ever made, but I had two other pets. One was called The Boat...

During the years we were trying to figure out what made movie fans laugh, and why, there was an extraordinary silent-pictures comic who made many successful one-reel and two-reel pictures. His name was Larry Semon, and he was so weird looking that he could have posed either as a pinhead or a Man from Outer Space. His movies were combinations of cartoon gags, fantastic gags, and farcical plots.

Chaplin, Lloyd, and myself couldn't make two-reelers as packed with laughs as Larry's. But when an audience got half a block from the theatre, after being convulsed by Semon's whammios,⁹⁹ they couldn't have told you what they had laughed at. I would say this was because they were impossible gags. Only things that one could imagine happening to real people, I guess, remain in a person's memory.

The same thing is true, for some reason, with most word gags. Bob Hope is one of the funniest men alive. He can double you up with bright quips and dazzling sallies. But how many of his jokes can you recall five minutes after the Bob Hope show goes

⁹⁸[Horror film aficionado's appear to have missed this one. It contains some very original horror ideas, at a remarkably early date.]

⁹⁹Jokes.

off the air? People talked about the sight gags in our silent comedies for weeks and months. Some of them are still remembered by certain of our fans, now middle-aged. I was talking to one of these fellows just the other day. I happened to mention that The Butcher Boy was the first movie I appeared in.

"Just a minute," he said, "wasn't that the one in which Fatty Arbuckle had a raccoon coat hanging on a hook that he put on to go into the store's big refrigerator, and he took off again when he came out?"¹⁰⁰

He was right to the point in that he had seen that picture just once, in 1917, forty-two years before.

When we went into features we also discontinued using what we called impossible gags or cartoon gags. These can be very funny in a cartoon short, and sometimes in a two-reeler. I'll illustrate with one I used in the finish of Hard Luck, one of my own early two-reelers.

At the end of the picture I go swimming at a fashionable country club. There were many elegant society people and beautiful bathing girls around the pool. To impress the girls I climb up to the 50 foot high-diving board and spend whole minutes testing it, flexing my muscles, showing off, measuring carefully the thirty-six feet between me and the water. The gag was that, after all that, I was to make a swan dive, miss the swimming pool completely and go through the adjoining marble tiling, making a big hole as I disappear into the earth.

We constructed a tank so that a portion of the pool was covered with thin wax, the wax in turn being covered with a paper imitation of tiles, so that when my hands hit the wax it would give way and I would go into the water. It was a perfect imitation, so perfect, in fact, that from the top of that diving platform I couldn't tell which was paper and wax and which was tile. I was so scared that if I hadn't lost my balance due to a sudden wind, I would never have left that platform.¹⁰¹

Down I went and then, bang! It cut my head and shoulders but I broke through the wax. That got a laugh, but not as big a laugh as the last few feet of the picture. After the fade-out a subtitle reading 'Years later' is flashed on the screen. It was the same scene. Again the pool at the country club is seen, but the whole place is now a deserted ruin, the swimming pool is covered with moss, and overgrown with trees and shrubs. There is no water in the swimming pool, but the hole in the tiling into which I disappeared is still there.

In a moment I clamber up out of the hole in the cement walk. I emerge in chinese costume, complete with pigtail, and then motioning with a sort of come on gesture, I help my Chinese wife and two kids up out of the hole. In pantomime I point to the high-diving board, then to the hole I made, and we all laugh.

Audiences used to go out of the theater howling at that. But that sort of gag I would never use in a full-length picture- because it could not happen in real life, it was an impossible gag.

BREAK A LEG!

A US actor's catchphrase meaning 'Good Luck!'. 20'th century. Origin doubtful. What you are supposed to say to an actor just before he goes on stage on opening night. Also used for any performance. It is a way of wishing them well without saying 'Good Luck', which is superstitiously believed to tempt the gods. In the US theater the catchphrase may be used by a producer, a stage manager, prop man, dresser, costume mistress or stage hand, any and all of whom deplore it's use by a 'layman'.

¹⁰⁰[So often used since that it has become a cliché.]

¹⁰¹[Buster is probably being over-modest here.]

They often laugh at me down at the studio, and are often unnecessarily worried because I disguise myself and do a bad fall or a stunt that an extra has been engaged to do. Any acrobat or tumbler would understand there is no lack of modesty in mentioning this. One gets trained to falls. Being thrown around never seemed to hurt me.

I had but one serious mishap and that was early in 1921 when I broke a leg while making the ninth two-reeler called *The Electric House*, in which we used a studio-built escalator. The accident happened when the toe of my slap shoe got caught in one of the steps of the mechanism, which could not be stopped quickly enough. As I got to the top of the escalator I was tossed for twelve feet, breaking my right leg. That laid me up for six months.

He broke a two by four piece of lumber with his leg on the way down, and his leg was broken as well.

I was unable to go back to work for four months. Breaking my leg, needless to say, had come as a shock to me. I took it almost as a personal insult.

We shelved everything I had shot on it and then later on I remade the picture.

APRIL. THE HIGH SIGN.

[The broken leg meant there was no other film to release.]

I had been discharged from the hospital but was still using a cane when I received a letter from Natalie in New York: 'I am alone now, the only one left living with mother. If you still care, all you have to do is send for me.'

We had had a sort of understanding for more than a year, but I hadn't seen her during all of that time and wished to think the whole thing over carefully. In the end I wired her that my leg was not yet strong enough for me to go to New York. However, I added that Lou Anger and his wife were going to New York in about two weeks, and I'd travel with them.

That telegram started fireworks. All of the Louellas and Heddas of the day wrote that I was coming East to marry the girl. They weren't sure she would accept me or another ardent suitor. He was an enormously wealthy Chicago dairyman. 'So which shall it be?' they wrote. 'Will she choose Buster's custard pies or her Chicago beau's butter and eggs?' Riding across the country, reading this kind of stuff in the papers we bought at the various stops, I understood for the first time the power of the press.

When I saw my bride-to-be, the big butter-and-egg man was hardly mentioned. Natalie had only one objection to marrying me. She hated to leave New York, something that was not hard to understand. New York then, at the beginning of the Riproaring Twenties, was the most exciting town on earth.

"Well, we gotta bring this thing to a head." I said.

She smiled and told me,

"Oh, Buster, you know where I'm going."

"Okay, where and when will we be married?" I asked in a brisk, businesslike tone.

"Let's make it a week from Saturday at my sister's home."

Though I didn't say, 'But this is so sudden', I certainly thought of it. But all joking aside, I was very happy about the whole thing.

Anita Loos: 'Peg chose Buster Keaton as Nate's husband- that mini Moliere of filmdom whose slapstick comedies were works of art... Nobody ever dreamed that those images would one day start to speak. Those of us whom the movies were making rich were bent only on cashing in before the craze died out...'



Louise, Myra, "Jingles", Buster, and Joseph Keaton at the time Buster broke his ankle while filming "The Electric House", and just before his marriage.

**KINO
VIDEO**

Do you think Buster felt that way?

No. I don't know what her problem is but Buster didn't feel that way. He loved making them, he had fun, they all did. It was like getting paid for having fun, he loved every minute of it.

Very hard work sometimes..

Yeah but, better than digging ditches.

Anita Loos: 'Peg had schooled Nate to look down on her husband as a mere substitute for a career, but in my opinion the chance to wake up in the morning and look across a pillow into that fabulous face should have been fulfillment enough for any girl.

Alone of all the Talmadge misadventures, the marriage of Natalie to Buster Keaton reached a climax of unmitigated tragedy. Their romance developed rather gradually- which should have made it all the more enduring. Throughout their early friendship, Buster had an affair with a boisterous young movie star, Viola Dana. But she flashed in and out of his life, leaving no repercussions.

Natalie, having failed as star material, was quietly holding down a secretarial job at the studio, in the course of which she and Buster frequently ran into each other. Their encounters had begun to verge on romance when World War 1 intervened. By the end of the war, Peg had come to grips with the fact that Nate might just as well marry a movie star. Joe Schenck came to their aid as Cupid, and ultimately he granted Buster a company to make his own comedies.

But Joe's generosity was solely a matter of nepotism. He had no understanding of the depths that lay beneath Buster's antics; he was never to learn that those films he financed would go down in movie history as works of art. Not only did Buster's creative talent, of which he himself was scarcely aware, suffer neglect at the studio, but he was also made miserable at home by Nate's lack of interest in his work.'

Peg was a tyrant about what those girls had to do. She made up her mind that Natalie had to marry a movie star or somebody, because she didn't have any talent, and she saw to it that she did.

In 1921 I was signed again at \$1,000 a week and celebrated the event by getting married to Miss Natalie Talmadge on May 30 of that year.

It was in Norma's garden- flowers everywhere; roses, I think. Ward [Crane] handed me the ring without a fumble; I put the ring on Nat's finger without a fumble and heard this voice....

"...I now pronounce you man and wife." I had Nat in my arms three- make it two- seconds and she was yanked away. I heard her mother crying. Joe, Lou, Ward, a whole gang were shaking my hand. Funny how I can remember how wet it was with perspiration and how I wiped it off on my striped trousers.

I looked and looked and finally spotted Natalie fifty rosebushes away talking with Anita Loos and John Emerson. Just then John Golden whistled. Our signal: 'the car is ready'. I grabbed Nat and said,

"Let's scram."

We headed for the big entrance gates, bulling through- not *that* fast, with my ankle.

But we made it. Just as we went through the gate there was music, and Nat said,

"Look."

Up on top of the wall was a monkey dressed as a bride, in a short skirt, doing a little dance. And a grind organ, somewhere, was playing 'The Merry Widow'.

The Limousine was there. We headed West, towards New York.

It was a perfect setup for a crack, so I slid the window back and called, "California, James."¹⁰²

¹⁰²[For no obvious reason Blesh treats this story, and no others, as 'faintly suspect', particularly the monkey. This seems odd, especially as

The Times account [Untruths marked *]: 'The marriage of Miss Natalie Talmadge, the screen star*, and Buster Keaton, the film comedian, took place yesterday afternoon at the summer home at Bayside, L.I., of the bride's sister, Miss Norma Talmadge, who in private life is Mrs. Joseph Schenck.

It was a quiet country wedding, staged in the midst of flowers and foliage. The ceremony was performed on the piazza of the Schenck home, which was decorated with a profusion of snowballs and other late Spring flowers. Justice Valenti of the County Court officiated. Miss Constance Talmadge, who is Mrs. John Pialoglou in private life, was matron of honor for her sister. The bride wore a simple frock of pale gray, and her sister was also gowned in gray. Ward Crane acted as best man.

The honeymoon will be spent in Los Angeles, and the bride is to appear with the bridegroom in his next picture play.*'

I know he loved her very much, and I think she loved him very much in the beginning, but I think Peg Talmadge, the mother of the three girls, sort of wanted her married and off her hands and since Joe Schenck made the Constance Talmadge and Norma Talmadge films, and made Buster's films, that would be keeping it in the family if Natalie married Buster. But at the same time, he was a lowly comic as far as they were concerned, and not all that important in the business or what they really would have liked to have had for her as a husband.

Peg Talmadge: "I don't let my daughters marry actors."

Buster: "But Peg, you let Natalie marry me!"

Peg: "You're not an actor, you're a comedian."

Buster spoke to Natalie about buying in the San Fernando Valley:-

We find a farmer with a wife and kids. We build 'em a cottage, and they run our farm. Give 'em a home. You can grow anything out there, Natalie. Just go down for water. We'll have an orange grove and chickens and a few choice cattle. We split the profits with the farmer. In a year or two, after it's running, we build a big, roomy ranch house of our own at the other end of the acreage. Beam ceilings, Stone fireplaces. Saddle horses, pets. We're by ourselves but only a few minutes from Hollywood and an easy haul to the beaches. We have servant quarters, a nursery, and we have a private baseball diamond. In the meantime we live in a rented apartment.

Anita Loos: 'As Mrs. Buster Keaton, Nate could feel important only by indulging the pretentiousness her two famous sisters lacked. She 'went Hollywood' with a vengeance. Buster, who had been brought up in ...vaudeville and had spent his early years in... theatrical hotels, had dreamed all his life of owning a bungalow with a garden in California. But married to Nate, he was pulled into a succession of showy homes which were burlesques of Hollywood bad taste.'

MAY. THE GOAT.

In the days that followed our marriage I made eleven more two-reelers and then late in 1922 started my first feature length production 'Three Ages'...

As newlyweds my wife and I at first lived in a modest house in Hollywood.

Her family moved to the Coast shortly before our first son, James, was born on June 2, 1922. Our second boy, Robert, was also born in June two years later.

he describes The Times account as sober and factual in contrast to Buster's 'romantic hindsight,' yet it starts 'Miss Natalie Talmadge, the screen star... and apart from the Times' minor inaccuracies, the two accounts gel perfectly.]

In my entire life I never knew a family so devoted to one another as my in-laws were. They all worked and thought together as a team without conflict or jealousy. They all liked me, I think, and I certainly liked and admired them. But there were times when I had the disquieting feeling that I had married not one girl but a whole family.

I discovered that this had also occurred to other people. My wife, both of her sisters, and I attended a rather formal party Mack Sennett was giving. The guest of honor was an aristocratic woman in her late twenties. Mack was so smitten with this society girl that he was using the broad 'a',¹⁰³ saying things like, "May I get you a drink, my dear?" and generally flouncing around like some ridiculous old french Roue.

Being a humanitarian at heart, I took it upon myself to bring the grandfather of movie slapstick back to his senses. I did this by getting his goat. This was never difficult, I might add. That night I simply asked the lady to dance and kept whirling her past him, cheek to cheek.

When the dance was over, Mack came over to me. He was such a violent-tempered man that I did not know exactly what to expect. Putting his hand on my shoulder, he waited until he had my attention. Then he looked at the the couch where my wife, her two sisters, and mother were sitting side by side. I watched his eyes move slowly from the face of one to another. Then he said,

"Buster, if I wanted to, I could keep you busy for years just explaining!"

Usually I try not to interfere in other people's affairs. But that evening, inspired by a few highballs and righteous anger, I was provoked by the behaviour of a famous woman star. She had been a Broadway show girl and resented the attentions being paid Mack's high-toned woman friend. Her husband, one of Hollywood's more dignified directors, was sitting, drink in hand, minding his own business. Childishly she walked up to him and accused him of flirting.

When he denied this, she pulled back her hand and slammed him on the cheek as hard as she could. Then she asked for her wraps and left. I was standing at the door and observed all of this. In going out, the star didn't give me a chance to get out of her way. She just shoved me to one side. Being no respecter of ladies who didn't act like ladies, I stepped through the door behind her and kicked her little behind so hard that I lifted her about a foot in the air.

She neither cried out nor looked back, just kept on going to her car. And she never told her husband about the incident. I know because I asked him about it years later, after they'd been divorced.¹⁰⁴

Myra: "You're too old to burn the candle at both ends. You're just like Joe was, too full of beans."

I would take myself aside and ask myself some questions.

'Me a big shot? Me a glamour boy?' I'd even ask my police dog.

"Captain," I'd say, "what are we doing here?" I never got a decent answer out of him. He'd whine, begin to wag his tail, then change his mind and unwag it.

Captain was a puppy with our first house. Now he was full-grown. He began sleeping on my bed at six weeks and two pounds. He had filled out to a hundred and

¹⁰³[The broad 'a' referred to is what the rest of the English speaking world might call a 'snooty accent.']

¹⁰⁴[Whose behind did Buster kick? It shouldn't be too hard to detect the name: famous female star, ex Broadway show girl, married to one of Hollywood's more dignified directors [that really limits the field], divorced later....Fun for all you movie history detectives...]

sixty pounds. It was his bed now. I had one corner, and that was shrinking. Though I hadn't taught him to drive yet, he went to the studio every day in the Mercer with me. He didn't like cops- especially on motorcycles.

Captain was my dog- and my dog only. Captain wanted it that way. Lou Anger had barred him from sets during shooting after he had floored Big Joe [Roberts] as he was roughhousing with me. He still, however, had sat by my side in the projection room during the dailies. Now that was off limits too. He had assaulted Big Joe's image by a flashing leap to the screen from ten feet away.

"There," said Anger in anguish, "goes five hundred bucks."

Even Arbuckle complained, Captain having knocked him down while he was wrestling with me on the lawn.

"My God," he said, "we can't even horse around any more. That wolf is going to kill one of us for sure."

"One of us is right," I said, "but not me."

Roscoe gave me a hurt look.

"You, of all people, had to get a dog without a sense of humor."

Jesse Lasky: 'Fatty' Arbuckle's career came to an inglorious end before the sound era. Arbuckle's two-reel comedies were produced by Joseph Schenck and released through Famous Players-Lasky, but they did so well we wanted all three hundred pounds of him for ourselves. When his contract was up for renewal, we outbid Schenck, and proceeded to launch him in feature-length comedies. He made at least a dozen for us, all of them high-grossing hits. Arbuckle was conscientious, hard-working, intelligent, always agreeable and anxious to please. He would invent priceless comedy routines and also had a well-developed directorial sense.

Automatic salary jumps at option time had stepped his pay up to something like \$7500 a week in the last year of his contract¹⁰⁵, and as other production costs were also rising, his pictures became fairly expensive to produce. We were anxious to save money by some tactic in order not to have our New York [office] on our necks with the perennial complaints of extravagance. I recalled the time I had taken over Caruso's eight-week contract from Schenck and made his high salary do double duty by rushing through two pictures instead of one. It would have been a master stroke of economy if the first picture hadn't flopped so badly we couldn't release the second one at all. I thought we wouldn't be taking such a chance on Arbuckle, whose drawing power at the box-office was firmly established. So I schemed with Ben Schulberg to go even further- and make three Arbuckle pictures in a row, without a day lost between them. The fat comedian was passed from the first director right to the second, with still another director impatient to call, 'Camera!'

It would be hard to imagine more strenuous work than making those old-fashioned lightning-paced comedies. I don't know of another star who would have submitted to such extortionate demands on his energy¹⁰⁶. But Arbuckle wasn't one to grumble. There were no temperamental displays in his repertoire. He went through the triple assignment like a whirling dervish, in his top form. They were the funniest pictures he ever made. We were sure they would reap a fortune. Schulberg and I congratulated ourselves on pulling a fast one that would save the company untold overhead. Three Arbuckle pictures in the vault at one time was like a cache of gold.

Fatty was understandably worn out after this marathon, and came in my office to say that he was motoring up to San Francisco to relax for a few days. He told me to be sure and let him know if I got up that way and we'd get together. Undoubtedly if I had been there at the same

¹⁰⁵[This is over twice the highest salary Buster ever earned.]

¹⁰⁶[This feat, shooting three movies simultaneously, has never been duplicated.]

time, I would have been one of the guests at the ill-fated party he gave in his suite at the St. Francis Hotel.'

On Friday, September 2, the Friday before Labor Day, I telephoned Roscoe Arbuckle.

"I just rented a yacht." I said. "Nat and I want you and Alice [Faye] to sail with us over the weekend. We'll go to Catalina- just swim, fish, and take it easy."

"Gee whiz, I'd love to, but I've made other plans." said Roscoe. "I've promised to drive up to Frisco with some guys."

"Who?"

"Lowell Sherman and Freddy Fischbach."

"Break it with them." I urged. "You'll have more fun with us."

I can still recall how disappointed Arbuckle sounded, how he hesitated.

"No," he finally said, "I can't. A promise is a promise."

Yallop: 'Roscoe had a great deal to be happy about. Not only had he finished three feature films simultaneously... but also Sunday, 4 September, marked the Fourth Annual Paramount Week. By 1921, this Zukor inspired promotion had become international and very profitable.

Arbuckle was one of Paramount's most popular stars. He had six different feature films running in Los Angeles that week, and in New York he had six feature films and twenty-seven two-reel films showing.'

'At this time, in the US alone, thirty-five million people a week went to the cinema.'



CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

The day the laughter stopped.

1921. Roscoe Arbuckle destroyed.

But one day in September 1921, all of the laughter in Hollywood stopped. Overnight what had been innocent fun was suddenly being denounced as 'another Hollywood drunken orgy' or 'one more shocking example of sex depravity'.

The day our laughter stopped was the day Roscoe Arbuckle was accused of having caused the death of Virginia Rappe, a Hollywood bit player and girl about town, in his suite at the St. Francis Hotel, in San Francisco. They'd had several weekend dates together, but there had been no arrangements made for this one. She just happened to be up in San Francisco at the time.

[The issues raised by the following chapter are many, and the effects are still being felt today. It would be easy for me to simply present Buster's comments, but he is obviously, to a suspicious public, an untrustworthy witness simply because Roscoe was his best friend. The smearing of Roscoe Arbuckle's name has been very thorough. Most people I've asked don't even know Roscoe was totally innocent, rather they believe the opposite, with vile details. Such is the power, even seventy years later, of scandalous rumour and innuendo fueled by perjured and suborned witnesses and whipped up for newspaper circulation by the worst yellow journalist in history. Furthermore, the recently very popular [and irresponsibly inaccurate] 'Hollywood Babylon Two' by Kenneth Anger still espouses the prosecution story, and unfortunately, he is not alone. The sober truth does not always make as saleable reading as extravagant lies.

However, it would be pointless to enter fully into the case, as

A.) it is not all strictly relevant to this book, and

B.) it would take a book the size of David Yallop's, or at least Andy Edmonds' to cover it. Thus, though I will attempt to make the story clear, I can but recommend Mr. Yallop's and Andy Edmonds' books, 'The Day the Laughter Stopped' and 'Frame-Up' respectively, to those who find the following chapter insufficient to their requirements. Mr Yallop's book goes into great detail and depth, but it can be summed up thus; Roscoe was not only totally innocent, he was also the victim of a conspiracy to pervert justice which would have been murder had it succeeded in getting Roscoe sentenced to death, as it intended to at the outset. Reading Mr. Yallop's book made this lover of justice extremely angry, and points up severe faults in the system of elected officialdom that America has adopted as the defender of its freedoms, illusory and otherwise.

Andy Edmonds more recent book, 'Frame-Up!' 'The untold story of Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle,' claims a new and more complete, and to my mind very believable explanation of what actually happened at The St. Francis Hotel, and why. In this version, Adolph Zukor (Paramount) was entirely responsible. He had a mess on his hands with the increasing morphine addiction of Wallace Reid, the drug related death of Olive Thomas, various high profile divorces, and more. All this was inciting moral indignation against Hollywood on a huge scale. Studio heads, Zukor especially, wanted Will Hays to play figurehead to a public 'clean-up', and offered very attractive terms. Hays was not very interested. It is claimed that Fischbach and Rappe were Zukor's catspaws in an attempt to blacken and then blackmail Arbuckle so that Zukor could

A.) lower his massive salary which he felt was a dangerous influence on other stars, [This is a matter of record] and

B.) force Hays to take up the appointment.

This plot went wrong when Rappe, drunk, tickled the notoriously ticklish Arbuckle, and his knee involuntarily jerked up, hitting Rappe in the stomach, setting off a chain reaction composed of chronic cystitis and a recently botched abortion (the most recent of many) and slapdash medical care. Andy Edmonds makes a good case for the above explanation, but unfortunately does not share her sources with us. Therefore, though it is completely possible, it is hard to treat it as solid history. The latter part, the knee jerk, is probably an attempt to explain the 'he hurt me' quote, where in fact no such explanation is needed.]

Sunday, September 11, Roscoe Arbuckle was in a San Francisco jail-held without bail prior to being officially charged with rape and murder.

Was it rape?

"No," said practical Hollywood. "he didn't need to."

Was it murder?

No, Roscoe Arbuckle couldn't murder a fly.

Certainly he was wronged, he was no more guilty of that than I was.

And the final verdict: 'Roscoe Arbuckle is entirely innocent and free from all blame.'

Adolph Zukor: 'There was nothing he could do, or anybody else could do. It was very unfortunate for him, because he had a great future, and of course his future ruined....'

I knew Arbuckle personally very well... He wasn't anything like chasing women or making dates with girls- he wasn't physically or mentally equipped for that. He was a big, heavy, easygoing, 300-pound comedian. He loved life, he loved parties, he loved people to come to his place. In my judgement, whatever happened I don't know, except that whatever happened was an accident.'

Midnight, Sunday September 11. After an emergency meeting. San Francisco theaters banned all Arbuckle pictures.

Early Monday 12 (as reported by the Times) 'Sid Grauman, long a personal friend of Roscoe Arbuckle's, withdrew his latest picture, 'Gasoline Gus,' without comment or announcement.' [Some friend.]

Tuesday 13. The Famous Players-Lasky office advised everyone to continue the Arbuckle screenings and Joseph M. Schenck declared the innocence of the accused. The Los Angeles Athletic Club expunged Arbuckle's name from the membership rolls.

Wednesday 14. Arbuckle banned from Los Angeles to Chicago to Philadelphia. Michigan's ban was unconditional and statewide. [Boo!] New York alone, through its Motion Picture Commission, firmly declared that it had 'no right to bar the showing of any film because of the morals or personal life of the actors who appear in it.'

Judge Lazarus instructed the jury at the police court hearing, "In my opinion we are not trying Roscoe Arbuckle alone.... We are, in a large sense, trying ourselves. We are trying our present-day morals, our present day social conditions, our present-day looseness of thought and lack of social balance."¹⁰⁷

Everybody had their picture in the papers for days and days and weeks, and it was headline news, ...W.R. Hearst told Joe Schenck in front of me, He says,

"This is hard to believe, but we sold more newspapers on the Arbuckle trial than we did on the sinking of the SS Lusitania."

Yallop: 'The Hearst press adopted an attitude towards the Arbuckle case that was criminally irresponsible. Feature articles, news stories and editorials in Hearst's newspapers had but one aim: to boost circulation.' 'When Hearst died in 1951, the Manchester Guardian wrote this epitaph: 'No man has ever done so much to debase the standards of Journalism.''

¹⁰⁷[This has to be one of the most peculiar directions to a jury ever to pass the lips of an honest judge. Clearly both Justice and law are in complete disagreement with this assertion, only the accused is on trial.]

Friday, September 30. Arbuckle returns to Hollywood on temporary bail. The dailies reported him as being stoned by a mob at the Los Angeles railway station. Only The New York Times was brave enough to print a reporter's eyewitness account of the large crowd that cheered him and presented him with flowers.

Next day, when his friends gathered at his house, a typical tabloid scarehead was:

ARBUCKLE CELEBRATES
IN LOS ANGELES HOME.

Buster was there...

What could you say to the poor bastard? He was getting the works. A funeral would have been more cheerful. Half the people there whispered and tiptoed around, and the others laughed too loud.

Jesse Lasky: 'All of us who knew him felt he was a victim of circumstances and not guilty of a crime. But the unfortunate affair occurred at a time when churches, women's clubs, and reformers already had blood in their eyes over Hollywood's alleged sinfulness and moral laxness depicted in some films. A hundred censorship bills had been introduced in thirty-seven states that year.

There had been ominous rumblings of public opinion even before the Arbuckle and Taylor cases blew the lid off. Some 'quickie' opportunists had hitched onto a postwar trend which manifested itself in a sudden rash of bawdy books, plays, and songs, and were making movies that violated good taste and decency. One town in Massachusetts retaliated by banning all motion pictures. More and more pressure groups were demanding federal censorship and regulation of films. Litigation and dissension within the industry itself also put it in a bad light. The nation's box-offices were beginning to reflect our loss of good-will.' [Lewis J. Selznick suggests Hays, who is given the job at \$150,000 a year..]

'The first bit of advice Hays gave us cost our company over a million dollars, wiping out a good share of our profits for that year. He strongly urged us not to release the three Arbuckle pictures in the face of inflamed public sentiment.

"His present notoriety might make the pictures even more profitable than they would ordinarily be," he told us, "but if you play them, you'll be playing into the hands of your enemies, besides doing the industry irreparable harm."

The decision was up to Zukor. He didn't waver over it. The three comedies were never shown.

Twice I had tried to reduce overhead by squeezing two and three pictures into the production time of one- and both times the films had to be shelved at a total loss. Caruso and Arbuckle taught me it isn't wise to bet on parlays.¹⁰⁸

The full poignancy of what followed can be grasped only when one considers how touched with magic Arbuckle's life had been during the years he had been a movie actor. Roscoe was born in Smith Center, Kansas, on march 24, 1887, which meant he was only thirty-four when catastrophe overwhelmed him. [Buster was 26.] He was a small child when his family moved to California and at eight made his stage debut in San Jose with the stock company of Frank Bacon. If he ever went back to

¹⁰⁸ [Parlay. To wager (money) on a horse race, cards, etc., and to continue to wager the original stake plus the winnings on subsequent races, hands, etc. 2:1200. K.H.M.M.]

school after that it was not for long. He did anything he could to stay in show business: was a ticket taker at one theatre, sang sentimental ballads in a nickelodeon, worked as a smalltime vaudeville blackface monologist up and down the West Coast.¹⁰⁹

Roscoe got his first movie job by dancing up the steps to a porch where Sennett was standing with Mabel Normand and casually doing some back flips.¹¹⁰ Sennett, thinking a policeman that fat might be very funny, put him on as a Keystone Cop at three dollars a day. His fame started shortly afterward when he appeared with Mabel Normand in a series of shorts called Fatty and Mabel. Roscoe had been with Sennett for four years when Schenck gave him his own unit. Yet it was only when he started doing features for Famous Players-Lasky that Roscoe Arbuckle got into big money. Then it became very big money indeed, \$7,000 a week.¹¹¹

Jesse Lasky was in charge of that studio which later became Paramount. In his autobiography, 'I Blow My Own Horn', he calls Arbuckle 'conscientious, hard-working, intelligent, always agreeable and anxious to please', he adds, 'He would invent priceless routines and also had a well-developed directorial sense.'

Once Lasky handed Roscoe the tough assignment of doing three feature pictures in a row without a day's rest in between. 'I don't know of another star,' said Lasky, 'who would have submitted to such exorbitant demands on his energy. But Fatty Arbuckle wasn't one to grumble. There were no temperamental displays in his repertoire. He went through the triple assignment like a whirling dervish, in his top form. They were the funniest pictures he ever made. We were sure they would reap a fortune....'

It was on finishing that backbreaking triple assignment that Roscoe drove up to San Francisco in his \$25,000 Rolls Royce for the Labor Day weekend. With him were the actor Lowell Sherman and Fred Fischbach, a comedy director. San Francisco always has been a high-rolling good-time town but never more so than in the early twenties when flouting Prohibition became the new competitive sport. Roscoe checked into a large suite at the St. Francis. Friends and free-loaders, including several of San Francisco's most important officials flocked there the moment news got around that Arbuckle, that prince of a fat man, was in town. Roscoe liked nothing better than playing host to all comers. He ordered three cases of the best whiskey and gin obtainable and all sorts of food sent up to his suite.

The day was hot, and he had put on pajamas with a dressing gown over them.¹¹²

Among his guests that weekend was Virginia Rappe, the twenty-five-year-old Hollywood bit player. She had a reputation for getting hysterical and tearing off her clothes after taking a few drinks.¹¹³

On hearing that Roscoe was in town, Virginia joined Arbuckle's party with an older woman ...

[Bambina Maude Delmont. 'Maude was not only a prostitute, she was also a bigamist and a con-woman, whose 'duty', as she said, forced her to accuse Arbuckle of rape and murder.

'Virginia was a good girl.' she told reporters. 'I know she has led a clean life, and it is my duty to see this thing through.' She did not tell reporters or other investigators that her duty to her profession

¹⁰⁹[Roscoe's childhood makes more harrowing reading than this suggests.

¹¹⁰[or not, according to various others.]

¹¹¹[Roscoe was therefore financially a bigger star than Buster ever became, as was Mabel Normand. Film historians tend to ignore both, because of the scandals that destroyed their careers, and simultaneously destroyed most of their films.]

¹¹²['Fatty was in pajamas and bathrobe because he had burned his butt on the last day of shooting, and pajamas were more comfortable than trousers.' 'Mabel' B.H. Russel. Yallop agrees, saying he backed into a stove. Edmonds claims he sat on an acid soaked rag at a garage, which seems less likely. The day certainly was hot and Roscoe was not the only one in pajamas.]

¹¹³[This is widely corroborated.]

and to her accomplice Al Semnacher had forced her to play the old badger game.'

[The Badger Game: a man is lured into a bedroom by a young woman, and when both are compromised a photographer appears, takes photos and leaves quickly. The man is blackmailed, and usually he pays. Arbuckle's defence lawyers had between 20 and 40 affidavits from Maude Delmont's previous victims which were never put in evidence because Delmont was not called to give evidence. D.Yallop.]

'Two days before Virginia died, Maude sent identical telegrams to a lawyer in Los Angeles and a lawyer in San Francisco: 'WE HAVE ARBUCKLE IN A HOLE HERE. CHANCE TO MAKE SOME MONEY OUT OF HIM.' Nor did Maude tell reporters the facts of good girl Virginia. At twenty-seven, Virginia was not the saintly victim depicted by the press. She had an illegitimate baby at sixteen, had undergone several abortions since then [and before then], was suffering from gonorrhea at the time of her death, and was once again pregnant. She had also suffered from chronic cystitis for a decade and had been forbidden alcohol by her doctors. Whenever she drank her bladder caused her such pain that she often screamed and tore off her clothing. Reporters failed to tell their readers at her death that the sanatorium where she died was a maternity hospital.' [Mabel. B.H. Russell.]

.... and her own manager, Al Semnacher. After her death, everyone in Hollywood who knew Virginia was surprised to read newspaper descriptions of her as a frail little flower, a starlet whom death had robbed of the chance to achieve the heights on the silver screen. The truth is that Virginia was a big-boned, husky young woman, five feet seven inches tall, who weighed 135 pounds. She was about as virtuous as most of the other untalented young women who had been knocking around Hollywood for years, picking up small parts any way they could.

I just know that Buster's always said that she was definitely a hooker, and this poor flower of the west being raped, or whatever, was just so much hogwash. He said the whole thing was just ridiculous.

After taking a couple of orange blossoms, a cocktail made of orange juice and gin, Virginia got sick. Most of the persons present testified later that she had started to tear off her clothes. She also complained of feeling ill. Roscoe had a couple of girls- one was the woman Virginia had arrived with- take her into the bedroom. He joined the three of them a little later and found Virginia in bed. Suspecting she might be faking he placed a bit of ice against her thigh. She failed to react, and he asked the women in the room to undress her and put her in the tub. When Virginia continued ill, Roscoe sent for the St. Francis house physician.

['Shortly thereafter the hotel detective, George Glennon, having been advised of Virginia's illness, arrived and questioned her in Delmont's presence.

George Glennon: "Do you believe the St. Francis Hotel is in any way responsible for your present condition?"

Virginia Rappe: "No, they are not responsible."

G.G.: "Did Mr. Arbuckle hurt you?"

V.R.: "No. He never hurt me."

G.G.: "Then who hurt you?"

V.R.: "I do not know, I may have been hurt falling off the bed."

Mr. Glennon duly noted this in his notebook.' Yallop.]

Virginia was removed to a hospital where she died a few days later.¹¹⁴ According to her woman friend, she had kept moaning just before she died, 'He hurt me. Roscoe hurt me.'

¹¹⁴[If there was a crime [other than bootleg booze] in the death of Virginia Rappe, it was probably a medical crime. Strange silences and contradictions surround parts of the treatment of her illness, and the post mortem [arrangements for which started an hour and a half before she died] was secret, illegal, and only discovered by accident. One might suspect that one of the doctors responsible for the post mortem was the doctor who carried out the [also illegal] slapdash abortion, and was trying to protect

[These words not in "" because all evidence shows she never said them.¹¹⁵]

It was largely on the basis of this statement that Roscoe was requested to come back to San Francisco for questioning by District Attorney Matthew Brady. He returned immediately, accompanied by Lou Anger and Frank Dominguez, an associate of Earl Rogers, California's most famous criminal attorney.

[Though the statement is the one that got him tried, among others by Delmont, Brady durst not put her in the witness box, due to the fact that A.) Her character would not bear the slightest scrutiny, and B.) She was a bad liar and therefore an easily discredited witness. For instance, she claimed in the press to be a lifelong friend of Virginia's, when in fact she had only met her two days before the party. She claimed that she called the physician and Arbuckle had to be forced to let him in, when in fact all witnesses agreed Arbuckle called the physician and Delmont was in another bedroom with a man when this happened. She claimed to have been working in films when she never had. And so on ad nauseam. Thus the extraordinary situation arose where the main, indeed only, witness for the prosecution put her accusations in the newspapers, but not in court. Yallop puts it thus succinctly: 'If the defence cross-examined her, the case would be thrown out of court.']

On September 12, a Coroner's Jury returned a true bill against Arbuckle charging manslaughter. He was jailed, held without bail until he was arraigned in a police court. Then the district attorney demanded that the charge be changed to murder. On the plea of Dominguez this was refused. The official charge became 'involuntary manslaughter', and Roscoe was released in \$5,000 bail.

Realizing the seriousness of Roscoe's situation, Joe Schenck tried to get the fabulous courtroom spellbinder Rogers to take over the case himself. But Rogers, old and sick and near death, begged off. He told Schenck, "Arbuckle's weight will damn him. He will become a monster. They'll never convict him. But this will ruin him, and maybe motion pictures also for some time. I cannot take the case, but prepare Hollywood for tornadoes."

The full text as given by Yallop: "Arbuckle's weight will damn him. He is charged with an attack on a girl, which resulted in her death. He will no longer be the roly-poly, good-natured, funny 350-pound fat man everybody loves. He will become a monster. If he were an ordinary man, his own spotless reputation, his clean pictures would save him. They'll never convict him. But this will ruin him, and maybe motion pictures for some time. Tell Joe Schenck I can't take the case- my doctors won't let me- but to prepare Hollywood for tornadoes."]

The tornadoes were already exploding all around us by then. Along with other friends of Roscoe's, I offered to go to San Francisco to testify. Among the nasty rumors circulated was one that Arbuckle had pushed a piece of ice into the girl's private parts, thus contributing to her death. As Roscoe's intimate friend I knew that any such obscene act would have been beyond him. I was eager to tell the jury this and

his rear. Yallop: 'Was the post-mortem an attempt to to cover up an illegal abortion? We will never know. The forces of justice that would be so intent on proving Roscoe Arbuckle guilty of murder did not at any time investigate the medical malpractice on Virginia Rappe- the malpractice which I am convinced caused her death.']

¹¹⁵[The 1993 edition of 'Famous Last Words' Jonathon Green:- 'Virginia Rappe, Hollywood Starlet*, killed* 1921. Good time girl, she tangled fatally with Hollywood comic Fatty Arbuckle*... 'I'm dying, I'm dying- he hurt me!' Ignoring the obvious inaccuracies [marked *] of the preamble, no credible report of such words exists, and none but the wilfully uninformed believe they were spoken. This statement was forced from two witnesses after a session so prolonged and unreasonable that rules for interrogation of supreme court witnesses were tightened thereafter. One witness was threatened with jail and the other was told that if she did not say Virginia said "I am dying, I am dying, you killed me." the authorities would take away her illegitimate child. The best evidence is that she actually said, "I'm dying, I'm dying, I know I am dying." Witnesses replied that she wasn't and gave her seltzer for what they believed were gas pains. Both witnesses refused to say Virginia said, "he" or "you killed me." but under extreme pressure substituted "hurt me". Further, these were not her last recorded words. See Yallop, pages 198-216.]

also to explain that it was I who had first told Roscoe that ice held against a person's thigh was the quickest way to discover whether they were faking illness.

Mr. Dominguez talked us out of going to the trial. He said that there was bitter feeling in San Francisco even against him for taking a case that local people felt should have gone to one of their own lawyers.

"They would resent you fellows even more," he said, "and discount your evidence, feeling you were merely Arbuckle's front men."

Buster couldn't testify on Roscoe's behalf, because the district attorney that was prosecuting that trial was determined he was going to be governor of the State of California, and he didn't care who he climbed over to do that.¹¹⁶ And they said, by the time they were through, Buster or any of the other friends that were to go up there, he'd fix it so they did more harm than good. Buster always said he wanted to go but they wouldn't let him.

Meanwhile an unprecedented storm of hatred and bitterness was sweeping the country against Arbuckle. Before he was even tried his films were barred in many communities including New York City. Reform groups everywhere threatened to boycott any theater which exhibited Roscoe's movies. Churches of many denominations rocked with their preachers' denunciations of the famous funny man. At a meeting of the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, a Danish delegate, Mrs. Forchhammer, dragged Arbuckle's name into a discussion of international white slavery.

Adolph Zukor and other producers of Arbuckle films received such a flood of abusive and condemnatory mail from Roscoe's former fans that they were frightened into promising that none of his pictures would ever be shown again. With all of this came persistent threats of national censorship. The studio heads, hoping to avoid that, decided to ask Will Hays, United States Postmaster General, to become czar of their industry and to censor themselves. They chose Hays, who had been President Harding's campaign manager, because he was the most influential politician in the United States.

In all there were three trials of Roscoe Arbuckle in San Francisco for manslaughter. The first two resulted in hung juries. In the third he was acquitted by a jury that said he deserved an apology from those who had wrecked his career with the baseless charge of contributing to the death of Virginia Rappe.

Before his first trial started, he had returned to Los Angeles to await the start of court proceedings. With some other of his close friends I went to meet him at the old Santa Fe Railroad Station in Los Angeles.

So did a hate-frenzied mob of 1500 men and women who seemed to want only to get close enough to tear him to pieces. And they yelled at the fat man they had loved so much a few years before, "Murderer!" "Big, fat slob!" "Beast!" and "Degenerate bastard!" Some of the crowd had come to cheer him, but they were drowned out in the din.

Roscoe never got over that experience. He never could forget how those people had looked at him and cursed him, how it had been necessary for the police to rush to protect him from them. People everywhere in the world seemed to feel the same way about him as that mob. By then the letters of abuse and vilification were flooding in from every country in the world.

¹¹⁶[This sentence sums up the vast majority of the real reasons why Arbuckle was tried at all.]

However, there was one spot on earth where nobody hated Roscoe Arbuckle or thought he was guilty. That was Hollywood, the town so often pictured as turning on its own people whenever they get into trouble. What Hollywood did later on to encourage this bewildered, baby-faced fat man to stand on his feet and face the terrifying outside world might well be remembered, I think, by all of us.

'From the beginning factual evidence had almost nothing to do with the three successive trials of Arbuckle. At his first trial on September 22, the judge recognized the paucity of evidence and reduced the charge from murder to manslaughter. On December 4, Arbuckle's first trial ended in a hung jury, ten to two for acquittal. On February 3, his second trial ended in a hung jury, ten to two for conviction. [Roscoe's lawyers, on the total collapse of the prosecution case, gave no speeches on the grounds that they weren't needed; but the jury thought this meant that they were admitting defeat.] On April 12, his third trial ended after one of the shortest jury sessions in history. The jury returned after five minutes, just long enough to compose their statement of exoneration: [Here in full from Yallop.]

'Acquittal is not enough for Roscoe Arbuckle. We feel a great injustice has been done him. We feel also that it was only our plain duty to give him this exoneration, under the evidence, for there was *not the slightest proof* adduced to connect him in any way with the commission of a crime.¹¹⁷

He was manly throughout the case, and told a straight-forward story on the witness stand, which we all believed.

The happening at the hotel was an unfortunate affair for which Arbuckle, so the evidence shows, was in *no way* responsible.

We wish him success, and hope that the American people will take the judgement of 14 men and women who have sat listening for 31 days to the evidence that Roscoe Arbuckle is entirely innocent and free from all blame.' [All jurors signed.]

During the trials, close personal friends like Mabel Normand and Keaton were powerless to help him and were persuaded not to testify on his behalf because Hollywood testimony could only hurt him. Adela Roger's father, Earl Rogers, refused to represent him because his status as Hollywood's finest criminal lawyer would imply Arbuckle's guilt. Industry moguls were powerless to help him because their own necks were on the block, and the good of the business community was at stake.' [Mabel, by Betty Harper Russel.]

[The trial cost Roscoe \$700,000. Because Zukor stopped his salary on the day of his arrest, and including withdrawal and withholding of his films, he lost approx. \$600,000 in income. Acquittal meant his films started to be shown again, then...

On 18 April, Will Hays made his first major public decision as official film industry watchdog. Six days after Roscoe's acquittal, he banned Roscoe Arbuckle from the screen.

Why did Hays do it? To Zukor and Lasky Roscoe's guilt or innocence was irrelevant, his trials had crippled the box office. But if Zukor banned his films he would face a revolt within the industry, so he talked Hays into proving the Association meant business. Many people assumed that because Roscoe was banned, that meant he had been acquitted for lack of evidence. Due to the tasteless phrasing of the lifting of the ban nine months later, many assumed it was lifted because Roscoe had reformed in some way. Even though the ban was unconstitutional, and a direct suppression of Roscoe's legal rights, Hays never admitted that the ban was a mistake, so it was possible to view the reinstatement as a Hollywood whitewash. Roscoe's career never recovered. [From Yallop.]

After the last trial and the ensuing Hays fiasco, Buster Keaton, talking with Natalie, summed up an era's ending.

Things will never be the same in Hollywood. Nor anywhere else.

¹¹⁷[My italics.]

I wondered if Buster had ever mentioned drug use around the studios, because there's a lot of it in other books on Hollywood.

He knew that Mabel Normand was on something but he never got into it, or maybe didn't know.

So his set definitely were not interested in any drug but alcohol?

No. There were two or three big stars, men and women, that died of drug overdoses, but they weren't friends of his.

I wondered how Buster felt about it.

If he thought about it at all, I'm sure he just thought it was stupid to even get started.

In later years Roscoe's second wife, Doris Deane recalled: "His name was Roscoe Conkling Arbuckle. He always signed his name Roscoe C. Arbuckle. When people asked him what the C. stood for, he would say, "Crucified." "



BUSTER KEATON
IN "THE PLAYHOUSE"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

Marriage and prosperity sneak up on me.

1921>22. Playhouse. Boat. Paleface. Cops. Pregnancy.

THE PLAYHOUSE.

Albert Lewin: 'An altogether extraordinary effect came from the dreamlike, obsessive, hallucinatory repetition of that strange frozen face. It was almost nightmarish- a phantasmagoria of masks. There is no question that Buster Keaton, among other things, was a surrealist even before surrealism. Such fantasy! Not even Pirandello ever conjured up such extraordinary visions.'

My acting career continued to prosper after I was married. When I completed eight two-reelers for Metro release, Joe Schenck set up a deal for me to make a dozen more to be distributed by First National, a company organized by independent theater owners. They were trying to make sure that Zukor, Loew, and the other theater chain operators would not control all of Hollywood's movies.

I still enjoyed doing burlesques and travesties more than anything else. In the first of the First National two-reelers, *The Playhouse*, I was deliberately kidding most of the guys in motion pictures, especially a guy by the name of Tom Ince.

Ince, an outstanding director, started takin' himself very seriously. He had the habit of giving himself every sort of screen credit possible. At the front of his pictures it would say,

**'THOMAS H. INCE PRESENTS
HEMSTITCHING ON THE MEXICAN BORDER.
WRITTEN BY THOMAS H. INCE.
DIRECTED BY THOMAS H. INCE.
SUPERVISED BY THOMAS H. INCE.
EDITED BY THOMAS H. INCE.
THIS IS A THOMAS H. INCE PRODUCTION.'**

So when I made *The Playhouse*, I used that. On the credit titles we put 'This is a Keaton picture. Keaton presents Keaton. Supervised by Keaton. Written by Keaton... costumes by Keaton... the cast of characters: they're all Keaton. I was the cameraman. I was the electrician- everything that there was to be. Everyone on the list was Keaton which got a belly laugh from audiences.

They laughed like hell at that.

And then I set out to be the only one in the picture. And I did a minstrel first part I was nine times on the screen. I was the whole orchestra. Nine exposures.

I did this by having the photographer make shots of Buster Keaton on the stage and playing all the various instruments in the orchestra. I was also the conductor.

Then I put different makeups on and I was four different sets of characters in the boxes. I bought a ticket from myself- I'm the ticket-taker taking a ticket from myself. I played all the parts. And for a finish, I was the whole audience.

In 1921, this required trick photography of a sort that had never been attempted. Until then a double exposure that showed a star (usually one playing twins) on the screen twice at one time made audiences gasp. But my cameraman managed to get nine different Buster Keatons on the screen at once. We set an all-time record with the nine exposures, it was considered a scientific miracle. This exposure thing is *very* tedious to do however.

Clyde Bruckman: "When he did use a camera trick, he did it deliberately, to make an impossible statement. Like multiple exposure. Not double exposure, which is a picture on top of a picture. Multiple exposure is dividing up the picture frame into parts, taping the lens to correspond, and photographing each part separately. Keaton didn't originate this idea. It had been used for years to show an actor in two roles at once. But it was a difficult technique. It was hard to join the halves of the picture without a telltale line down the middle. It was also hard to get the separate actions to synchronize- like looking up at the exact moment that your alter ego, in the earlier exposure, said something to you. Buster did the multiple exposure to end all multiple exposures. It was in Playhouse. He did an entire minstrel show all by himself- nine Busters in blackface on the stage at once. Every move, song, and dance exactly in unison. That meant taping off the lens into nine equal segments accurate to the ten-thousandth of an inch. 'It can't be done.' said Lessley, the cameraman.

"Sure it can." said Buster. "We won't use tape."

He built a lightproof black box, about a foot square, that fitted over the camera. The crank came out the side through an insulated slot. It was in the front that the business was: nine shutters from right to left, fitted so tight you could have worked underwater. You opened one at a time, shot that section, rolled the film back, opened the next shutter and shot, and so on.

"Keep this a secret, you lugs." said Buster.

We did. Hollywood gave up on that one. No one even tried to copy it."

Actually, it was hardest for Elgin Lessley at the camera. He had to roll the film back eight times, then run it through again. He had to hand-crank at exactly the same speed both ways, each time. Try it sometime. If he were off the slightest fraction, no matter how carefully I timed my movements, the composite action could not have synchronized. But Elgin was outstanding among the studios. He was a human metronome.

My synchronization was gotten by doing the routines to banjo music. Again, I got a human metronome. I memorized the routines very much as they lay out dance steps- each certain section at a certain beat in a certain measure of 'Darktown Strutters' Ball'.¹¹⁸ Metronome Lessley set the beat, metronome banjo man started tapping his foot, and Lessley started each time with ten feet of blank film as a leader, counting down, "Ten, nine, eight," and so on. At "zero"- we hadn't thought up 'blast off' in those days- banjo went into chorus and I into routine. Simple.

But I made one very bad mistake with that picture. I could have made the whole two-reeler just by myself, without any trouble. But we were a little scared to do it, because it might have looked as though we were trying to show how versatile I was- that I could make a whole half-hour picture all alone, without another soul in the cast. That's the reason why we brought other people into the second reel, and that was a mistake.

Later on, we'd have done it to Zanuck and Mervyn Le Roy and a few people like that. Having kidded things like that, I hesitated to put my own name on as a director and writer.

By midsummer of 1921 the Keaton company's baseball nine was the talk of Hollywood. One columnist claimed it had been offered a Pacific Coast League franchise.

One sportswriter quipped that the entire Keaton employment form read as follows:

Please check one of the following questions:
Are you a good actor? Yes / No
Are you a good baseball player? Yes / No
Passing grade: 50%

¹¹⁸[This is a rarity, a comment from Buster on the music used.]

NOVEMBER. THE BOAT.

Which of the two-reel shorts was your favorite?

... I had two pets. I very much liked a two-reeler I made for First National, called *The Boat*. The mechanical things of a picture like *The Boat* would hold you up longer (than tricks like *Playhouse*).

This told the story of a man with a wife and and two small boys. I built a 20-foot family cruiser in the basement of my house, and then found it was too big to get out. I had to knock out the end wall of the house to get the boat out of it. But I finally got it to the water. Then, after all that, when I got the boat on the landing cradle and launched it, it sank.

Some of *The Boat's* laughs were in the filming, not the film. Gabourie, the new technical-effects man Lou Anger had hired,¹¹⁹ seemed infected by the Keaton Syndrome. He built two separate Damfinos, outwardly alike, but intended for two different purposes. One was designed to sink at launching, the other to float.

The gag was that I should launch the boat, and it should slide down the launching ramp into the water- and straight to the bottom. Well, it took us three days to get that launching, because we kept running into bugs. I had to work like a dog to get the bugs out of that scene.

Number One refused to sink. She simply would not go straight down to the bottom..

The first thing we do is to build a breakaway stern to the boat, so that when it hits the water it'll just collapse and act as a scoop- to scoop water. That works fine except the nose stays in the air, we've got an air pocket in the nose. So the whole thing has to be perforated so that no air pockets collect.

We get the boat back up and bore holes all through the nose and everywhere else, and we added scrap iron to give it weight.

We cut it loose and watch it slide down the ramp. Well, There's a certain buoyancy to wood; no matter how you weigh it down a wooden boat won't sink. This time the boat hesitates- it slows up- before slowly sinking; so slow we can't use the shot. You don't like to undercrank when you're around water, because you can spot it immediately, the water's jumpy. Our gag's not worth a tinker's dam if she doesn't go smoothly straight to the bottom.

We put something like sixteen hundred pounds of pig iron and T-rails in it. Try her again. Its bottom kept falling out and dumping the iron to the bottom, whereupon the empty shell would shoot up like a cork. Each time this happened the location rang with laughter, Elgin Lessley, crew and cast all rolling on the ground. Gabourie sweated and swore. Finally, patience gone, he faced the recalcitrant hulk.

"Goddamn your miserable waterlogged soul, you're going to sink!" He gave up on the scrap iron. If it won't slide down the slipway- it has to be pulled.

So we go out in the Bay of Balboa and drop a sea anchor, fastened steel cables below the waterline to a pulley on the stern, and ran them out to a tug. We get all the air holes out of the boat, we made sure that the rear end would scoop water, and with the tug right out of shot we pulled that boat under the water.

Number One sank by main force. All hands cheered.¹²⁰

Number Two, built to float, was determined to sink.

¹¹⁹[Gabourie was hired after *The Electric House* accident. Previously Buster had been doing most of this work himself]

¹²⁰[Again, Buster has neglected to mention that in the case of every attempt to sink Number One, he is standing on the prow of the boat.]

"This can't happen to me." said Gabourie, although it already had. All through the voyage, Number Two kept taking on water and listing, until finally a crew had to stay belowdecks manning jury-rigged pumps.

"It's your ordeal by water." I told him.

Afterwards Gabe promised

"Someday, I'll get you a boat that is a boat, one that will sail if you want it to sail and sink if you want it to sink.

When they did The Buster Keaton Story at Paramount and they wanted a remake of that launching scene with Donald O'Connor playin' me, the same things came up. I ironed all the bugs out of it for 'em in five minutes, before they built it. So they got the scene in one morning- the first take. But that scene alone cost them \$60,000 to make-making The Boat, my salary included, cost only \$22,000.

The end of [a scene in] this movie drew a lot of favorable comment. It showed my porkpie hat valiantly floating along on the surface of the water as though I were walking underwater just beneath it.

<1922.>

I was a box-office draw in the darndest country in the world. Russia.

Since 1920, when I was first starred in the movie The Saphead, I've enjoyed another reward as a dividend. This comes whenever people smile on seeing me and call out my name. This thrilling acclaim was given me in London, Paris, Mexico City, and practically everywhere else I have traveled.

It happened in New York the night in 1922 that the Chauve-Souris opened. It was a gala night, and the whole house literally swarmed with celebrities. But I was the only one summoned backstage by Nikita Balieff, the Russian show's master of ceremonies. The women kissed me, and the men pumped my hand.

My wife and I were puzzled until I pointed out that none of our big Hollywood stars were in the audience. But mentioning this occasion now reminds me that when Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., came back from one of his triumphal world tours he told Joe Schenck,

"Who do you think is the Number One movie star in Russia? Buster Keaton, that's who."

I was a bigger box-office attraction than Chaplin in Russia. There was just one discouraging thing about this, it was the one country you couldn't get any money out of.

You mean you never got any money out of Russia?

No. The limit was \$5,000. Russia would never pay more than \$5,000 for a print of any movie. That went for Doug Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Chaplin- anybody- \$5,000 was the most you could get. The reason for this is that they bought from the Berlin exchange. They rented a picture just to play one week in Moscow, and once they got the print there they duplicated it, made a dupe negative, and made as many prints as they wanted so it could be shown everywhere - Omsk and Tomsk, Yalta to Vladivostock, they sent them all over the country. They paid you \$5,000 for that one week. Which meant it might have been more profitable for me and my employers to be Number One star in Upper Monrovia or East Budapest.



JANUARY. THE PALEFACE.¹²¹

Personally, I've never had the slightest fear of jumping off into a net from a great height, or doing a dive into water; and the only kick I got out of a net jump was during the filming of *The Paleface* when I had to drop 85 feet from a suspension bridge into a net. The day before we shot the scene the technician who set up the net, and who claimed to be a former fireman, offered to prove the net was safe by making the jump himself. I told him to go ahead. He jumped and, failing to hit the net properly, broke a leg and a shoulder. When I stood on the same spot the next day, with the cameras grinding, I couldn't think of a thing save that man who was in the hospital. I came darn near not doing that scene. But because I didn't want to show yellow before my own gang I did the jump and it was successful. [1930.]

From time to time we brought famous and talented writers from New York. I do not recall a single one of these novelists, magazine writers, and Broadway playwrights who was able to write the sort of material we needed. An example is Al Boasberg. When the talkies came in Al Boasberg became the best-paid gag writer in Hollywood, a walking marvel of verbal firecrackers and yak-getting wows. But he had been a terrible flop when he tried to do sight gags for us. So were a hundred other writers we imported from New York. It is possible, of course, that we kept sending for the wrong ones.

I always thought that Otto Soglow, the cartoonist who draws 'The Little King,' would have made a great success dreaming up sight gags for us. But I never was able to complete the arrangements to bring him to the Coast.¹²²

Bugs Baer is another one who could not have missed. I think he would have made the same sensation writing sight gags as he scored with the daily humorous columns he is still [1960] doing for the Hearst newspapers.

I actually did manage in 1922 to hire Bugs Baer to write gags for me. I had gone to New York to attend the World Series that fall and ran into Bugs at the Friars Club. He told me he was very sore at Hearst at the moment. When I offered him a job he accepted it immediately.

Though eager to work with me, Bugs explained that he was getting married and would be away for two or three weeks on his honeymoon.

When he arrived at the studio I asked him where he and his bride had gone on their honeymoon.

"Oh," he said, "we went to that place they call 'the bride's second disappointment', you know, Niagara Falls."

Oscar Wilde: 'When I first saw the Falls I was disappointed in the outline. Every American bride is taken there, and the sight must be one of the earliest, if not the keenest, disappointments of American married life.'

Bugs had hardly picked out his desk when long-distance calls started flooding the studio switchboard. A procession of Western Union boys also began streaming in. It turned out that Bugs had told nobody in the Hearst organization that he was quitting. They had just found out about that and that he was working for me. Bugs's editors informed him that they had him sewed up under an iron-clad contract. The messages

¹²¹[Though it is possible to extrapolate only general philosophical ideas from Buster's movies, *The Paleface* is quite openly pro-Indian, and portrays unscrupulous captains of industry cheating them. As I understand it, it is the only clearly 'political' attitude in any Buster movie.]

¹²²[see *The Little King*. Final American feature attempt.]

reminding him of this, ranged in tone and spirit from, 'Come home, dear Bugs, come home to us now' to 'Our lawyers will call on you tomorrow!'

As the day wore on the wires became more urgent. Any stranger reading them or listening in on the frantic incoming phone calls would have thought I had kidnapped Bugs Baer and was holding him for ransom. The Hearst executives had gone to my boss, Joe Schenck, for he wired me from New York, 'Release Bugs Baer at once.'

They also appealed to Will Hays, newly appointed czar of the Motion Picture Industry, and his wire read: 'Bugs Baer is the exclusive property of William Randolph Hearst. He is to take the first train back to New York.'

Bugs took the first train back to New York and kept right on going until he reached Europe, where he remained for two years, only returning to work for Hearst on being given a big raise.

MARCH. COPS.

In Cops I was a New York junkman, and we bought a spiritless, broken-down, sway-backed old horse to pull my wagon. By that time, incidentally, the studios were buying the livestock they needed. It was cheaper than renting them they had found, and they could sell the animals when the picture was finished.

Anyway we bought this old-timer. Bruckman, for some cockeyed reason, named my co-star Onyx. In the picture the nag was supposed to be deaf. We put earphones on him, connected by wire with an old-fashioned telephone box on the side of the wagon. When I wanted the horse to stop or move, I picked up the phone, cranked it, then said, 'Whoa!' or 'Giddap!', and he immediately obeyed these orders.

The plot had me unknowingly picking up a homemade bomb. This explodes just as I am crossing Fifth Avenue during a police parade. In the chase the entire New York police force pursues me.

There was a scene- before we stumble into the parade- where Onyx slows down and can't pull the heavy load of furniture any longer. I'm to unharness him and lead him out from the shafts. Then it's to cut and show me, bit in mouth, between the shafts pulling the wagon, then pan back and show Onyx up in the wagon riding.

It was a good idea except that Onyx wouldn't go along with it. He was the soul of co-operation until we tried to get him to walk up the ramp into the wagon for that scene. Then he balked. He wouldn't walk up the ramp.

We wasted a day trying to get him up in that wagon. I had a crane brought to the studio, planning to hoist the horse up by putting a veterinarian's bellyband under him. We got the vet's saddle under him all right, but the moment we tried to lift him off the ground Old Dobbin snorted and started kicking away viciously at everything and everybody whenever we came near. We finally gave up and shot the scene with me pulling the wagon alongside of the horse. Not as good a gag, but it had to do.

That finished the Saturday shooting, so we took him back to the studio. I decided we would have to find another horse that resembled him to double for him on Monday.

But when we returned to the studio on Monday morning we saw the reason for it all. Onyx had a brand-new colt standing beside her. As has happened in many another case, mother knew best in this instance. Somebody, we figured, ought to tell us about the birds and bees. Bruckman was just opening his mouth to say something. I could feel the word forming in his mind. I beat him to it.

"The baby's name," I said, "is Onyxpected!"

His mother now walked up the ramp like a real trouper, and we finished the picture in jig time. The foal was perfectly healthy and friendly. The little fellow became the pet

of the lot. He would walk on the set or into my dressing room to see what was going on; or into Lou Anger's office to find out if the bookkeepers were on the job.

Some sources suggest that Cops is a response to the Arbuckle trial, and that My Wives Relations is a covert jab at the Talmadges. Is this likely?

I have never heard of Cops, or anything else Buster did, being related to anyone like Arbuckle, or that type of thing.

Wife's Relations had nothing to do with the Talmadges. Most of the time those things were a collaboration of three or four writers and himself, and I doubt that any one of them ever did anything in a personal way.

Natalie found to be expecting.

After shifting Roscoe Arbuckle to Hollywood five years before, Schenck had kept the two sister's companies in New York. After Natalie's marriage, Peg Talmadge commuted back and forth between the East and West coasts. She, as well as Norma and Constance, had been pressuring Schenck to move everything to California. Now, with Natalie expecting, the heat was really on.

The moment the women heard the news about Natalie, Joe didn't have a Chinaman's chance.

So in January, 1922, he began preparing for the move.

Peg came right on out and moved in with us, and the girls rushed their current pictures through. They were converging on us like homing pigeons all that early spring. By April the walls were bulging. Nat had said,

"This Westchester Place house will be big enough for anything." Perhaps it wasn't Sanforized. It had certainly shrunk.¹²³

'The three sisters went house hunting. Peg took stabs at it, and even busy Buster helped. The house was soon found and rented. It was on Westmoreland Place, a house with a ballroom filling the third floor, a vast house...The invincible sisterhood escorted young wife and husband into this find, settled them- and themselves- firmly into various cells and wings. Housewarming began and never stopped; Connie was learning to ride a bicycle in the ballroom or racing about in a new Mercer roadster that matched Buster's; friends filled the great halls at all hours; Peg was busy trying to direct the gestation of her first grandchild.'

It was not exactly a rest home.

Peg Talmadge: Buster looked... "Straight out of his serious brown eyes in an almost disconcerting fashion. Any vacuous politeness, or banality, or hypocrisy seems to be instantly killed under that direct, straightforward stare." 1924.

Sounds right. He'd just stop and look, with the stillness, whoever was on the other end of the stare would be forced to stop and be still. In other words, he could see right through them. He'd let them know that without saying anything. In effect the look would say, 'Be quiet, don't talk, listen.' he could do that without saying anything, just with a look.

The eyes were hazel, not blue or brown. They're hazel, which is a combination of brown and gold actually, and green.

A year and a half after the marriage it was arranged legally that Buster's earnings from the Buster Keaton Productions firm would be paid directly to Natalie. This agreement was signed on the thirtieth of October 1922. He was now bound to give his wife all the money he would make for the next five years. (Dardis.)

¹²³['Sanforize' was the proprietary name of a commercial dry-cleaning process. K.H. presumably guaranteed not to shrink.]



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

The new deal.

1922>1923. My Wife's Relations. Blacksmith. Frozen North. Electric House. Daydreams. Balloonatic. Love Nest. Features. Three Ages. Vanity.

MAY. MY WIFE'S RELATIONS.

June. This announcement appeared in the Los Angeles newspapers: 'Joseph Talmadge Keaton, born Friday evening, June 2, 1922, at exactly 7 minutes past 7 P.M., weighing exactly 7 pounds and born with 7 lungs.'

JULY. THE BLACKSMITH.

See The Navigator, "You remember that dud."

AUGUST. THE FROZEN NORTH.¹²⁴

In The Frozen North, which I made the following year, I did a burlesque of William S. Hart, the great Western star. At one time Hart's popularity was exceeded by only three other performers, Chaplin, Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford. In 1922 he was still a great drawing card. Bill, though, was not one of your handsome movie cowboys, and he took himself and his art quite seriously. In his pictures he did not sing, whistle, or yodel. Nor did he dress like some Dapper Dan of the Great Plains. As a boy he had lived on the Frontier, and he tried hard in his pictures to show the Old West as he remembered it. The saloons in Hart's pictures looked like the ramshackle bars he had seen there.¹²⁵ The people who sat drinking, playing poker, and having gun fights in them behaved like human beings, equally capable of good and evil. Bill himself played what came to be known as a good bad man.

But Bill, in his youth, had left the West to become an actor. He had played Shakespeare, toured with Modjeska¹²⁶, appeared in the original 1899 production of 'Ben Hur' as Messala, the villain. All this had given him some taste for ham flavoring. If Bill didn't romanticize the Old West he sure gimmicked up his good bad man with plenty of imaginative touches. He rolled Bull Durham cigarettes with one hand. He kept his stetson on with a leather string tied under his chin. On his gaunt eagle face this looked good, but no real cowboy ever wore one to my knowledge. Real cowboys also didn't blaze away at human varmints with guns in both hands, as Bill did on the screen. But the main thing he did in his pictures that they didn't do in real life was cry. After about 1918 there was at least one scene in every Hart movie in which Bill broke down and unashamedly let glycerin tears roll down his thin, leathery he-man cheeks.

In my burlesque of Bill Hart I got a good laugh by opening with a scene showing me coming up out of a New York subway exit kiosk situated in the middle of frozen Donner Lake.

Mark Twain: 'In Sacramento it is fiery summer always, and you can gather roses, and eat strawberries and ice cream, and wear white linen clothes, and pant and perspire, at eight or nine in the morning, and then take the cars, and at noon put on your furs and

¹²⁴[Yallop states, on what evidence I know not, that Roscoe wrote The Frozen North, to get 'mild revenge' on Bill Hart for turning on him when he was arrested.]

¹²⁵[Hart's movies are widely considered to contain the most authentic picture of how the old West actually looked.]

¹²⁶[Helena Modjeska, Polish born dramatic actress (1840-1909), her American career was a series of triumphs between 1877 and 1905.]

your skates, and go skimming over frozen Donner Lake, seven thousand feet above the valley, among snow banks fifteen feet deep, and in the shadow of grand mountain peaks that lift their frosty crags ten thousand feet above the level of the sea. There is a transition for you! 'The Innocents At Home.'

He comes up out of a subway terminal into a big bank of snow, and he took his flat hat and fixed it just like Bill Hart's hat, campaign hat from the Spanish-American war.

Like Bill, I kept my hat on with a leather string tied under my chin and I carried a six-shooter on each thigh. I made futile attempts to roll a cigarette with one hand. I didn't name Hart, but I was two-gun Bill all the way through.

But it was an action gag in this picture that burned up Bill Hart when he saw it. This showed me coming home and discovering a couple hugging. Though I cannot see their faces I am convinced it is my wife and a lover. I turn pale, then amazed, and finally am crushed. When I saw my girl in another's arms, I cried.

But I was having trouble with the glycerine tears and could only cry from one eye. So I took my finger and moved some glycerin over to the other eye. Huge glycerin tears roll down my face. It is as if I am saying to myself, 'The better man won'. I shrug hopelessly and turn away. Yes, I turn to go. But just as I reach the door I look back and discover them kissing.

This is too much even for me, the human worm, to endure. I pull out both guns and shoot them down like dogs. But they don't fall like dogs. They stand up, whirl around, and then, kerplop, dead on the floor.

Full of power, I walk back masterfully to look at them. I gaze in indifference at the stranger who has wrecked my home, savagely kick his lifeless form to one side. I am about to kick my wife's dead body aside also when I get my first look at her face. It isn't my wife at all. It is some other woman I've never seen before. A subtitle flashes on the screen. It reads, 'My God! I'm in the wrong house.'

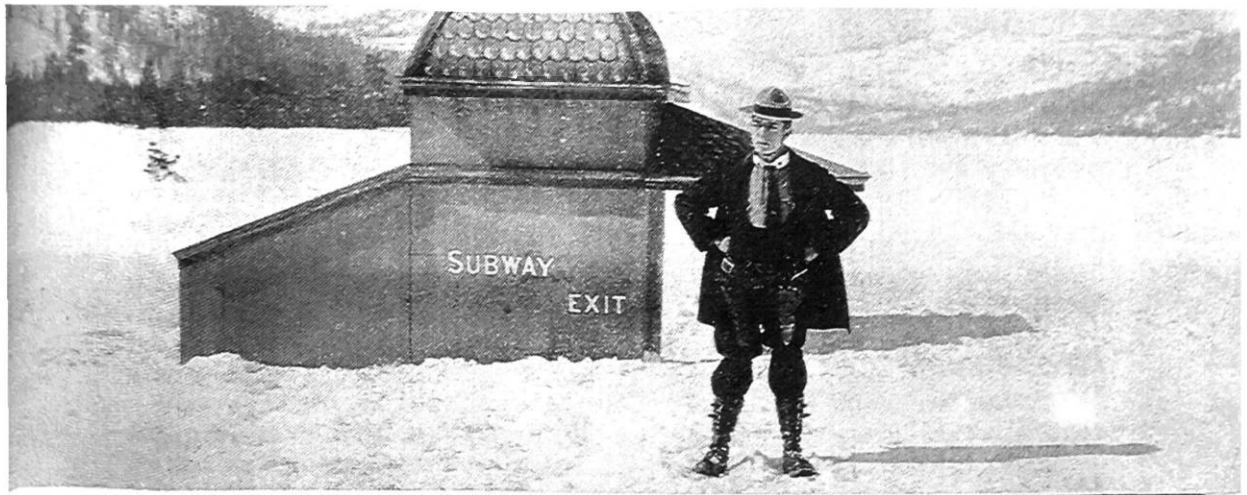
Bill's fans knew, of course, when they saw this picture that I was burlesquing their idol. As an old-time trouser Bill should have known that you can only burlesque successes, never flops. Also that if I imitated him it was only because I admired him so much that I wanted to be Bill Hart for a little while on the screen.

Ballet dancers, along with tenors, are supposed to be the most temperamental of performers. I've done imitations of both without hurting their feelings. Once when I was a kid we played on the same bill with Pavlova, the world's greatest ballerina. I imitated her doing her classic, 'The Dying Swan', and Anna Pavlova loved it.

But Bill Hart, the Western sheriff with the heart of oak, couldn't take it. Mutual friends told me that he didn't mind too much the leather string under my chin, the two guns blazing away, or messing up his one-handed cigarette-rolling trick. What really got him, they said, was my kidding his crying. I know Hart didn't like it a bit, but a lot of people had been waiting for it to happen. My guess is that he knew in his heart how fake that was. Perhaps he did it just to prove that his fans would accept anything he did on the screen. Bill did not speak to me for two years after he saw that picture.

It has been said that Buster lampooned Bill Hart because of Harts hostility to Arbuckle during his trial, is this likely?

The Frozen North was definitely a burlesque of Bill Hart, had nothing whatever to do with Arbuckle. It had to do with the fact that they always had these great big head close-ups of Bill Hart crying out of one eye only, which was a fake tear. They knew each other well, I don't know how good friends they were before that,



but that certainly put a dent in it. Some people have no sense of humor and sometimes Buster's went a little overboard.
As a result of that Bill Hart didn't speak to Buster for three years afterwards.

OCTOBER. THE ELECTRIC HOUSE.

Second version. First version aborted due to injury just before The Playhouse.

NOVEMBER. DAY DREAMS.

3 reels. Prints incomplete.

1923.

JANUARY. THE BALLOONATIC.

Molly Haskell: 'There is a similar, if more gallant, awe of women in The Balloonatic, a short film in which Keaton plays a lothario on a back-to-nature trip, living in the wilds and struggling unsuccessfully with fish, bears, the rapids; into his midst, a young woman materializes and overcomes all these difficulties with humiliating ease.'

MARCH. THE LOVE NEST.

[The movie in which Gabourie starts making good on his promise of a real boat.]

I had made eleven of the twelve pictures for First National and was starting the last one when Joe Schenck got his telegram from John D. Williams, president of the company:

'WE DO NOT WISH TO RENEW KEATON CONTRACT STOP WE CANNOT BE BOTHERED WITH HIS SHORT SUBJECTS'

Schenck showed this to me.

"Okay," I told him, "I will do them an additional favor! I won't make the last picture for them."

"Buster," said Joe, "your contract calls for you to make twelve pictures. I can handle this situation- but not if you refuse to make the final picture for them."

"But if they say they can't be bothered," I said, "my answer is 'Fine, then I'm doing you a favor in not bothering you with a twelfth picture.'"

I explained that Mr. Williams was putting me in the same ridiculous position as Martin Beck had when he stood in the wings and said to Pop,

"Make me laugh!"

"How can I make a man laugh," I asked, "who tells me he can't be bothered with my comedies? Why should I want to?"

When Schenck saw Mr. Williams later, Williams admitted the wire was a bluff, sent to counter the demand for more money they expected us to make.

That being the case, Mr. Williams outsmarted himself, for I never did make that twelfth little movie for First National. Just about that time Loew sent word that he wanted me to make full-length features for his company, Metro, to release. The first of these Metro releases was Three Ages, the second, Our Hospitality.

Well, then, we started making features. Working with my own unit on my own lot I made several successful ones. The new deal enabled me to do two features a year, one for spring release, the other for the fall. These took about eight weeks to shoot against three for a two-reeler. This new schedule allowed me much more time for building up the story and the other preparatory work. Cutting required from two to three weeks.

This allowed me three weeks off between the end of one picture and the start of the next.

In one or two of my later two-reelers I had tried putting in a story line. But this had not always proved feasible, and the faster the gags came in most short comedies, the better.¹²⁷

I never repeated a gag or used the same plot twice unless these could be so heavily camouflaged as to be unrecognizable. Often the plot was based on a melodramatic situation as in *The Navigator*, where one nation's agents set adrift a steamship just bought by its enemy. But the situation need not always be a serious one. A good example of a lighthearted plot is *College*.

When we turned to the making of features we found a whole set of new problems facing us. One of the first decisions I made was to cut out the custard-pie throwing. By then we thought pies were pretty silly. It seemed to me that the public by that time- it was 1923- had had enough of that. The pies looked messy on the screen anyway. So no pie was ever thrown in a Buster Keaton feature.¹²⁸

After we stopped making wild two-reelers and got into feature-length pictures, our scenario boys had to be story-conscious. We couldn't tell any far-fetched stories. We couldn't do farce comedy, for instance. It would have been poison to us. An audience wanted to believe every story we told them. Well, that eliminates farce comedy and burlesque. The only time we could do something out of the ordinary had to be in a dream sequence, or in a vision. So story construction became very important to us.

The thing is not to be ridiculous. Sometimes we're in the middle of building a gag that turns out to be ridiculous. So, well, we have to think of something else. Sit it out. The cameras are our own, aren't they? We never hire our cameras. And we've got a start, and we've got a finish, because we don't begin on a film if we haven't, so all we've got to get now is the middle.

What decided you to go into feature films instead of continuing with the shorts?

Well, because the exhibitor would buy two pictures- he'd buy a feature-length picture and a short, and if he got one of my shorts, or Lloyd's, or Chaplin's, he would bill it above the feature picture he'd bought. And of course, the feature he bought with us was always a second-rater. We never got any big stars on the same bill with us. We never got any Bill Harts, Mary Pickfords, Gloria Swansons or Fairbanks or anybody. We got the darndest stars you ever heard of. We had the second- and third-rate stars on the bill with us.

Well, for instance, if the theater, a first-run theater here in Los Angeles was paying us \$500 a week rental for our short, he was probably paying only \$500 for the feature.¹²⁹ Well, long as the exhibitor was featuring us anyway, we weren't gettin' the best of the program by doin' it. We stopped makin' two-reelers and went into features. So it was mainly a financial decision?

As long as they were going to advertise us above it anyhow- we're the drawing card, we might as well get into the feature field and instead of getting \$500 for the picture we take \$1,500. It makes a difference.

We all had to go into feature production, Schenck said it was the only way to get big rentals. The exhibitor, anyway, was often featuring our two-reelers over his main film.

¹²⁷ [This is yet another example of Buster being modest, all the two-reelers have fun plots.]

¹²⁸ [Actually, I don't believe a pie was ever thrown in a Keaton two-reeler, but not having had the opportunity to check them all, I cannot say for certain.]

¹²⁹ Or:- Well, your natural rentals in those days- for instance, if he paid \$300 rent for a two-reeler for the week, he would be paying \$900 for the feature.

So why not make him pay for it? It would more than double the rentals- would mean twenty-five hundred dollars and more a week from each theater. Multiply that amount by several hundred theaters, just in this country alone. And don't forget how much longer pictures ran than they do nowadays. In those days, in point of fact, good features were shown and reshowed for years. That's what put us into feature length pictures.

As for me personally, feature stories meant something else again. We were knocking ourselves out dreaming up new stuff every six weeks- and gambling each time. A couple of duds in a row and you could slip way down the ladder. With six months- four times as long- to each film, you could give it all you had. And, I had begun to want longer stories. A challenge, yes, but also room to develop the thing. To wring it out. To really say it.

Of the features, which is your favorite?

I have two- The Navigator and The General.

How did the scripts for these features evolve?

Well, now we will go back to our type of pictures. Now when I say 'our type' you've got three people who were making them at that time: Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and myself. Until I left my own studio and went to MGM- which was a different proposition- we never had a script. We didn't work by one. We just got to talking about a story and laying out all the material that we could think of, and then got it all put together- everybody connected with our company knew what we were going to shoot, anyway, and we didn't have a schedule. We didn't need a script. I knew in my mind what we were going to do because with our way of working there was always the unexpected happened. Well, any time something unexpected happened and we liked it we were liable to spend days shooting in and around that.

How long did it take you to shoot a feature in the mid-20's?

We averaged about eight weeks of shooting.

Which was the most popular of your features?

My biggest money-maker was The Navigator.

How about the total gross on an average feature of yours?

We'd average between a million and a half and two million. Some of them hit the one million mark, some climbed to two million.

And how much did a feature cost?

Our pictures cost, on the average, about twenty or thirty per cent more than the average feature- dramatic feature.

How much would that be as of about 1925?

Oh, most of my features cost from \$200,000 to \$220,000 to produce and grossed in rentals \$1,000,000 upward. The enormous profits justified our spending that much on production, 20 to 30 per cent more than the average dramatic feature then cost to make.

At the same time Harold Lloyd would go higher- he would probably be closer to \$300,000. And Chaplin- you had no way of telling at all because he was liable to quit in the middle of a picture and go to Europe, take a trip, start and get lazy and only turn out about one picture every two years, so I never knew what his costs would run.

Speaking of Chaplin and Lloyd and your other contemporaries, I wonder if you would care to express an opinion of their work as fellow comedians, or tell us which among the other comedians were your favorites?

Well, my favorites- I guess Chaplin, of course, was number one. But I liked Harry Langdon very much, and I liked an old one called Lloyd Hamilton. I liked W.C. Fields. Those were my pets, and then probably Lloyd.

Lloyd actually made the most films, didn't he?

Yes, he did. He turned out quite a list. He was doing the same as I was, he'd make a spring release and a fall release- two pictures a year.

Do you feel that American audiences or European audiences appreciated your films more?

I did a bigger business in Europe than I did in the United States.

Were you much aware of what the critics were saying about you during the '20's? Did you pay much attention to them?

I hadn't because I'd been reading house notices since I was born, and was used to that. This critic likes you and this one don't, so that's that. I've had some good friends. One of the best critics I think I had was when Bob Sherwood was editor of 'Life'. He was always on my side. I could do no wrong for him. The majority thought that I was going to develop good.

On the features you made independently, you usually co-directed these-

Yes. And the majority of them I did alone.

On The co-direction, did this mean that you were directing the scenes in which you yourself didn't appear, or-

When I did appear.

When did you start cutting your own films?

When I started to shoot my own pictures. I had learned to cut from Arbuckle.

Dardis: 'Schenck raised Buster's salary from \$1,000 to \$2,000, and a little later to \$2,500, while continuing the 25% bonus on the net. Up to 1928 (Keaton estimates)- a half decade during which costs rose rapidly- Buster's features, despite expensive production, cost on the average only two hundred and ten thousand dollars each. And (his bonuses indicated) they outgrossed the phenomenally successful two-reelers.'

Clyde Bruckman: "One of Buster's abilities was his judgement of materials in advance. Honestly he made us look like green hands. He seemed to sit apart- outside himself- and just look at things. Not only the material for others in the picture, but for himself. I have damned seldom seen him go wrong. [He used to say..]

"The plot is as important as a tune to a jazz band, and no more."

The cameramen knew one thing: never stop cranking until Bus said,

"Cut!"

Anything might happen. Once into action, it would unfold in his mind, developing as he went along, germinating from a gag to a scene, from a minor scene to a master scene.

"Well," we would say after a long scene that no one had dreamed of had been filmed, "well, what do we do now with such and such a sequence? How the devil does this fit with it?"

"Hell," Bus would say, "don't you see? we don't need it now." "

SEPTEMBER. THREE AGES.

Molly Haskell: 'In the Three Ages, his spoof of Griffith's 'Intolerance', Keaton introduced the figure of the Amazon; she would crop up, in different forms, in several of his later films.'

Big families got belly laughs in the early twenties. I was a pint-sized caveman with a gigantic wife and eleven kids in Three Ages. [Picture caption.]

Blesh: 'Joe Schenck, after setting up the Keaton Studio for features, had sailed to London with Norma and Constance to pick up the winner of a highly publicized English beauty contest. The prize- second lead in Norma's next picture, 'Within the Law'. Schenck and party returned with the winner, Miss Margaret Leahy, and her mother.

On the first day it became apparent that she couldn't act. She could not even be coached in the mechanics of walking, standing, and sitting down. On the third day, Norma's director, Frank Lloyd, gave up: either Leahy left or he did.

Schenck was boxed in. He wanted Lloyd. Privately, having seen Miss Leahy perform, he didn't want her in Norma's picture. But the contest

prize had no escape clauses, and if Miss Leahy and her mother were to sue for breach of contract they had a perfect case. Then Schenck found an out. It was said by some - that he got the idea from his mother-in-law.

When Buster objected to including the English girl in 'The Three Ages', Schenck retorted, "Comic leading ladies don't have to act." Buster knew better. Schenck said The Three Ages would triple its gross in England with an English heroine. Buster gave in.'

I'm shooting this scene and there's this actress who's the niece of the head of the studio, or something. She has to say

"I'm glad." and she has to say it through her teeth. She says it looking happy. She can't do it. She just can't see how you can say something and mean the opposite.

It was a silent shot but I wasn't going to alter the line. I say to her,

"You go and cancel your date, you're going to do it if it takes me all night." Just a common ordinary close-up and it took me eighteen takes. In the end she was so damn mad about the dinner she did it.

The scenes we threw in the ash can! Easy scenes! We got a good picture- we could have had a fine one. But, my God, we previewed it eight times! Went back and reshot scenes like mad.

The features I started making in 1923 for M-G-M's release had a gratifying reception. Three Ages, the first of these, was in three episodes. I was thinking of 'Intolerance' when I made it. I told the three separate stories the same as Griffith did.

The point of this comedy was that love and the relations of man and woman had not changed since the dawn of time. We used Wallace Beery as a villain. And what I did was just tell a simple story of two fellows calling on a girl, and the mother likes one suitor and the father likes the other one. And in fighting over the girl and different situations we could get into, and finally winning her... In other words, I just show us calling on the girl, the two of us, gettin' sore at each other because we're in each other's way.

But I told the same story in three ages. I told it in the Stone Age. Then I went from the Stone Age to the Roman Age, did the exact same scene with the same people, only the setting was different and the costumes. And the same thing happened in the Modern Age. So every situation we just repeated in the three different ages. Every sequence of this script was repeated, one after the other- just doing the same thing, only doing it three different ways. Cut the film apart, and then splice up the three periods, each one separately, and you will have three complete two-reel films.¹³⁰ That was the picture. It was all right because as far as story construction goes it didn't mean much to the audience, but there was enough laughs to hold up.

And of course in that film I did take liberties, because it was more of a travesty than a burlesque. That's why I used a wristwatch that was a sun-dial, and why I used my helmet the way I did. Fords at that time had a safety device to stop people from stealing the cars: a thing with a big spike which you locked on the back wheel and which looked just like my Roman helmet. So I unlocked my Roman helmet off me and locked it on the wheel of my chariot. At the time the audience all compared it with the safety gadget for a Ford.

J.G. This seems to lead to the question of how you find your gags. do you get them from the set, things in the decor...?

¹³⁰[In fact, this is exactly what Griffith did to 'Intolerance' after said epic flopped at the box office.]



Yes, props, and characters, and everything, and then look for the simplest things to go wrong. And that leads to bigger things. But there is nothing worse with us than a misplaced gag. Someone may suggest a good gag, or even an excellent one, but if it doesn't fit the story I'm doing and I try to drag it in, then it looks dragged in on the screen. So it's much better to save it, until some time when it does fit what I'm doing. J.G. Quite often you start off a film rather slowly, and the camera movement increases as the action builds up.

Deliberately. I always do that. I use the simplest little things in the world, and I never look for big gags to start a picture. I don't want them in the first reel, because if I ever get a big laughing sequence in the first reel, then I'm going to have trouble following it later. The idea that I had to have a gag or get a laugh in every scene... I lost that a long time ago. It makes you strive to be funny and you go out of your way trying. It's not a natural thing.

J.B.: And you look for a gag to get yourself out of the situation: the pole-vault gag with the spear for instance in *The Three Ages*. There you were in a situation where you had to get the girl out of the hands of Wallace Beery. How did you work your way to the spear vault from that?

I couldn't just run over a batch of rocks or something to get her: I had to invent something, find something unexpected, and pole-vaulting with a spear seemed to be it.

According to Clyde Bruckman, queried subsequently, this was the first combination of live action with simultaneous cartoon action.¹³¹

"It was Buster's idea," Bruckman said. "Having put Beery on an elephant, we were wondering, 'How do you top an elephant?'"

Buster said,

"Remember Gertie the Dinosaur?"

We looked blank, and he said,

"The first cartoon comedy ever made. I saw it in a nickelodeon when I was fourteen."¹³²

"I'll ride in on an animated cartoon."

Then he figured out how to work it.

We were flabbergasted. Jean Havez finally looked at him with that fat John Bunny squint and said,

"This guy's memory isn't elephantine, it's dinosaurian!"

It strikes me that compared to anyone else I've ever seen on stage or film, that Buster's work is seriously hard work. Did he see it that way?

¹³¹[Kevin Brownlow considers this to be incorrect, it is not the first.]

¹³²[Two short sentences packed with arguability. 'Gertie the Trained Dinosaur by Winsor McCay, is generally regarded as the first important cartoon in film history.' '..is unquestionably the first work of animation art.' Not the first cartoon comedy ever made, but everyone seems agreed, the first worth noticing. 'Emile Cohl: "On the stage, in front of the screen, McCay stood, in evening dress, whip in hand. He started a little speech; then, going back to the screen, like a lion tamer he gave an order to the beast, which came out from behind the rocks. Always under command of the tamer, it gave an exhibition of acrobatic skill; the dinosaur jumped, danced, uprooted trees and finally took a bow in front of the wildly applauding audience." 'Gertie the Trained Dinosaur may well be the most famous cartoon short in the entire history of animation...yet there is uncertainty as to the date of its first showing. For a long time it was generally accepted that Gertie was released as a vaudeville act in 1909; recent research, however, has led some to settle on 1914 as the likeliest date. This conclusion is based on the actual date of copyright and on various newspaper announcements of Gertie's theatrical release. Yet the Museum of Modern Art, in its description of the film in its archives, gives Gertie's date of birth as 1909 and flatly states that the 1914 showing was a reissue. Some doubt, therefore, still persists.' Buster was fourteen in October 1909, and so agrees with The Museum of Modern Art. As to whether he saw the vaudeville tour or a nickelodeon show, I cannot say.]

Yes, but he enjoyed it, he put in long hours and enjoyed every minute of it.

The idea that all actors are vain is very widespread, do you normally find it to be that way?

Oh yes. I think they have to be, or they wouldn't be actors. I mean, they don't necessarily have to be vain about their looks, although that's a big part, but they have to be vain about their ability to perform. In other words, they almost have to have some kind of ego somewhere. Buster had ego in that from the time he was a child, he knew what he was doing, and he knew it was funny. He could tell by growing up with the laughs that came from an audience. That was his ego, just knowing within himself that he knew what he could do. Some people, specially the women, are vain about looks, a lot of the men are vain about looks, but a lot of it has to do about their ability.

Would you say that was Buster's only vanity, I mean, it's more a self-knowledge than a vanity..

Yes, but as far as I know that was it. I never knew of any other thing.

He was very shy. Buster needed people to come and offer him things. He'd never in the world go out to make contacts; he'd rather die than seem to be pushing himself on anybody. I never ever knew him to ever to offer to.. like he would push himself to go meet somebody, but if they wanted to meet him, people he admired he'd be thrilled to death about it. He always treasured a dish from The White House, when Calvin Coolidge was president, he invited Buster to come to The White House and meet him and everything. They talked in The Oval Office and whatever and he gave him a plate from The White House dining room as a gift. Buster always remembered that and treasured that plate. He met more than one president for that matter after he was in film, not when he was in vaudeville. Well, you know, the presidents are people, they're fans.

Clyde Bruckman: Let me cite a couple of instances. There's a gag in Buster's first feature, The Three Ages. The scene was the Ice Age. Bus wanted one of the cavemen to heave a big rock at him; he would take a batter's stance, swing his war club, bat the rock back, and it would bean the other guy. Now, you do this easy by the cutting technique. One shot of the guy throwing. Next shot, the rock sailing in the air. Next shot, someone out of camera range lobs it up to Buster and he bats it. Cut again. Next shot, just reverse your second shot to show the rock sailing in the air in the opposite direction. Final shot, close-up of the rock beaming the guy. Put it all together. Easy as duck soup, not a problem in a carload; the studios do it every day. It rolls across the screen with a whoosh- but you never saw the thing really happen; it's a patchwork of half-truths. Now, Buster accepted the fact that this rock must be papier-mache. But he wouldn't accept action trickery. It had to be continuous action, from the moment the caveman picked it up and heaved it straight through to the moment it homed back and coldcocked him. He said,

"We get it in one shot, or we throw out the gag."

We set up the cameras for a long profile shot- the rock was going to sail for thirty feet- and we worked for hours. Seventy-six takes, all for one little gag.

"Okay," said Buster, "now they'll know it was for real."

The other gag was even tougher. On the face of it , it was impossible. [see Sherlock Jr.]

Can you cite an example of something that started out as an accident and ended up by working well for you?

Yeah. For instance, in Three Ages I was doing one of those high, dizzy things. I went to jump across an alleyway on top of a tall building. We built the sets over the Third Street tunnel,¹³³ looking right down over Los Angeles. Now, by getting your

¹³³ The Third Street tunnel is in downtown Los Angeles

cameras up on a high parallel and shooting past our set in the foreground with the street below, it looked like we were up in the air about twelve, fourteen storeys high. And we actually had a net stretched from one wall to the other underneath the camera line so in case I missed any trick I had a net to fall into, although it was about a thirty-five foot drop.....

And you didn't use a double?

No. So my scene was there and the cops were chasing me. I came to this thing and I took advantage of the lid of a skylight and laid it over the edge of the roof to use as a springboard. I backed up, hit it, and tried to make the other side which was probably about eighteen feet. Well, I misjudged the spring of that board and I didn't make it. I hit flat up against the other set and fell to the net, but I hit hard enough that it jammed my knees a little bit, and my hips and elbows, 'cause I hit flush, flat- and I had to go home and stay in bed for about three days.

I think he said he was bruised all the way down.

At that same time, me and the scenario department were a little sick because we can't make that leap. That throws the whole sequence, that routine, right out the window. So the boys the next day went into the projection room and saw the scene anyhow, 'cause they had it printed to look at it. Well, they got a thrill out of it, so they came back and told me about it. I says,

"Well, if it looks that good let's see if we can pick it up this way. The best thing to do is to put an awning on a window, just a little small awning, just to break my fall."

'cause on the screen you could see that I fell about, oh I guess about sixteen feet, something like that. I must have passed two stories.

"So now we go in and drop into something just to slow me up, and I can swing from that onto a rainspout and when I get hold of it, it breaks and lets me sway out away from the building hanging on to it; and for a finish, it collapses enough that it hinges and throws me down through a window a couple of floors below."

Well, then we go back and check up on what this chase was about- the chase was this: I was getting away from the policeman, and we used the old Hollywood Station on Hollywood Boulevard which was right next door to the fire department. Well, then this pipe broke and threw me through the window. So we went in there and built sleeping quarters for the fire department with a sliding pole in the background. So I came through their window on my back, I slid across the floor, and lit up against the sliding pole and dropped to the bottom of the slide. I bounced from the bottom of that to set on the rear of one of the trucks and the truck pulled out, so I had to grab on for dear life. I'm on my way to a fire- but the fire was at the Police Department. So we went back and shot the scene where I accidentally, not knowing it, had set fire to the Police Department before the cops started to chase me.

Well, as it ended up, it was the biggest laughing sequence in the picture- all because I messed up the original trick.

We always had a scenario department and I found that the ideal size was three men to work with you. They were Jean Havez, Clyde Bruckman and Joe Mitchell, I had off and on Bob (Robert E.) Sherwood. He wrote a story for me and I didn't do it- we couldn't get a finish to it.

[Almost certainly the same location that Lloyd used for 'Safety Last' and for less well remembered scenes in many other performers movies of the period. Despite Lloyd's protestations that it was done on a real building, we know this was not so.]

I started makin' features in '22 and I didn't leave my studio until '28 to go to MGM, but I did my regular two pictures a year- there was a spring release and a fall release. None of those pictures, that's Our Hospitality, The Navigator, The General- all of 'em- there was never a script on any of those pictures... And our detail work in things like Hospitality and The General, period pictures, had to be correct. We did our own research right up there in the scenario room. We were very particular about details, costumes and backgrounds, props and things like that. And never a script. Because when we had what we knew was a story, and had the material and the opportunities to get our high spots, we'd bring in our cameramen, our technical man who builds our sets, the head electrician and the prop man- those boys are on weekly salary with us- we didn't just hire 'em by the picture, they were right there. And we go through what we had in mind on things. They make notes. They know what's going to be built. The prop man knows what props he's got to have and the stuff to be built. The electrician knows what he needs in the way of lights and stuff like that. By the time that we're ready to shoot, there's no use havin' it on paper because they all know it anyhow.

And with us, we may lay out a routine in a nice set that we've built for this and we start out in this thing and we find out we're not gettin' anyplace. The material is not working out the way we thought it would. We could feel it. Not only looking at our own rushes, we could feel it also. Now, in a broom closet or somethin' like that, we're liable to find a very good routine. So we shift right then and there. We just devote our time on that and the thunder with that big set. We didn't care about big production. We didn't give a darn about that. So- if we were workin' by the script, you see, that would throw the whole thing right out the window. Well, that would happen to us with the first and second day of shootin'... Sometimes we'd do nothing all day. Then the next day 20 minutes of film.

We didn't shoot by no schedule at all. We didn't know when we started whether we was goin' to have the camera up five weeks or ten weeks. And it didn't make any difference. We owned our own camera. We're not paying rent on anything. All our people are on weekly salary anyhow... We've just got two pictures a year to make and that's all there is to it.

In England, as Schenck had predicted, huge audiences turned out to see 'that nice English girl who won the contest'. A London newspaper heralded the premiere: 'Attended by a royal party headed by the Queen Mother, the opening in London next week of Buster Keaton's first feature comedy, Three Ages, will be the most brilliant compliment ever paid an American film. Besides Queen Mother Alexandra, there will attend Princess Alice, the Earl of Athlone, the Duke of Northumberland, the Duchess of Devonshire, and the Countess of Limerick. Also, there will be a private screening for the royal newlyweds, the Duke and Duchess of York.'

Blesh: 'When the filming of a picture began, Keaton always set the writers to work on a new story, conferring with them at night, squeezing in the time, somehow, amid the ceaseless parties at home. The Three Ages, following heavy previewing and revisions, was barely in the shipping cans when the next plot, developed from a Havez idea, was ready. Its title, 'Southern Hospitality', was soon changed when it was heard that a film of the same name was under way elsewhere. The writers, privately concerned with the toll Buster's social life was exacting, wanted the location scenes to be shot first. They suggested the High Sierra country near Lake Tahoe, which in summer is at its best.'

"Let's do the Hatfield-McCoy feud." Havez had said.

"Great!" I exclaimed. Then I laughed and said, "But let's call 'em Canfield and McKay. That gang might come gunning for us."

"If we do it, we do it right."

Buster told Natalie:

"Our little Joe has a part in the new picture. Just one scene and you can bank a hundred bucks for him. And you, Nat, are my leading lady."¹³⁴



¹³⁴[Natalie's role in *Our Hospitality*, her only starring part, ironically gives her real cinematic immortality, where her two famous sisters, who made umpteen successful movies, are almost forgotten already.]

CHAPTER NINETEEN.

"You'll never make another mistake."

1923. Our Hospitality. Gin, Jazz, and jezebels.

NOVEMBER. OUR HOSPITALITY.

That's a beautiful film. The first time I ever saw it was in the museum of Modern Art in New York, and they had, they may still have I don't know, a sepia-tone print, instead of black and white it was brown and white, and it looked like old Courier and Ives prints, early American photographers. It was a beautiful film to look at. I've never seen another sepia print.

Three Ages did well, and my next feature, Our Hospitality, did even better. In its first week at the Capitol, Loew's big Broadway presentation house, it equaled the box-office record, and in Loews Circuits hundreds of theatres it nearly tied the box-office record for the chain. I made five more features on my own lot for M-G-M release. Sherlock, Jr., Seven Chances, Go West, and Battling Butler, and the second of my two favorites, The Navigator.

We were very conscious of our stories. We learned in a hurry that we couldn't make a feature-length picture the way we had done the two-reelers; we couldn't use impossible gags, what we call 'cartoon' gags, like the kind of things that happen to cartoon characters. We lost all of that when we started making feature pictures, they had to be believable, or your story wouldn't hold up. If we had done what we were trying to do in a feature the audience would go along with us, believing in the characters they were watching. So in pulling an impossible gag on them in a feature, we would have been saying, 'April fool!' or 'Sucker!' to them for believing in our story. We had to eliminate all these things because we had to tell a logical story that an audience would accept. So story construction became a very strong point with us. We had to get sympathy to make any story stand up, but the one thing that I made sure of, that I didn't ask for it. If the audience wanted to feel sorry for me that was up to them. I didn't ask for it in action. No begging.

The Second picture was really a big seller, called Our Hospitality. We had this one idea of an old-fashioned Southern feud, but it looks as though this must have died down in the years it took me to grow up from being a baby, so our best period for that was to go back something like eighty years.

"All right," we say, "we go back that far. And now when I go South, am I travelling in a covered wagon, or what?"

"Let's look up the records and see when the first railroad train was invented."

Well, we find out: and they had those silly lookin' engines- we've got the Stephenson 'Rocket' for England and the 'De Witt Clinton' for the United States. We placed the period in 1831 to take advantage of the first railroad train, that's when they just took the stagecoaches and put flanged wheels on 'em to make passenger coaches. And we chose the Rocket engine because it's funnier looking. And they're naturally narrow-gauge, and they weren't so fussy about laying railroad track. I mean, if it was a little unlevel, they just ignored it, they laid it over fallen trees, over rocks (laughs). So I got quite a few laughs ridin' that railroad....

So we built that entire train and that set our period for us:¹³⁵ 1825 was the actual year of the invention of the railroad.¹³⁶ Now we dress our people to that period. And that was fine because we liked the costumes: you've got away there from the George Washington short pants and into the more picturesque Johnny Walker type of costume, C.B. Some of your films have more melodramatic situations than, say, Chaplin films- you get into very dangerous situations and then get out of them. Was this something that you were particularly working on?

In the features I soon found out that one had to present believable characters in situations that the audience accepted. Our best format for our type of pictures was to start out with the normal situation, maybe some little trouble- not enough to handicap us for getting little laughs- and introducing our characters if we wanted to. That permitted us to introduce the characters getting in and out of situations that were not too difficult. But when we got down to about that fourth or fifth reel we would get into something serious and start getting laughs. It was when we approached the final third of the picture that we had the characters in serious trouble which permitted bigger laughs, and then get out of that situation and end up getting our biggest laughs of all when catastrophe threatens in that last reel. That was always the perfect format for this type of picture.

As the rushes began arriving in Hollywood the writers were appalled. It began to dawn on them that they had made a straight man out of the star and thrown the comedy to Joe and the locomotive. Bruckman and Havez telephoned Buster for instructions.

"Relax, I knew it all the time, it won't spoil the picture. I played against Joe for seventeen years."

But when I got down South to claim my father's estate, I ran into the family who had run us out of the state in the first place. And the old man of the outfit wouldn't let his sons or anybody shoot me while I was a guest in the house 'cause the girl had invited me to dinner. Well, I'd overheard it and found out. As long as I stayed in the house I was safe.

Three weeks after they began shooting in the mountains, Natalie discovered that she was pregnant.

Before we finished that picture, we didn't dare photograph her in profile.

Joe Schenck said,

"Never use Natalie in another picture. You could break this company."

For that scene in the rapids, the one where I'm trying to catch Natalie- someone doubled for her in those shots, of course- we picked the best rapids from a pictorial point of view, a two-hundred-yard stretch where the water moves fast and white. I'm supposed to grab onto a sixteen-foot log and float out into the bad water.

"Can you hold onto the log?" Gabourie asked me. I said,

"Yes." So he put a holdback wire around the log, ran the wire out about sixty feet, and then anchored it tightly around a baseball bat. There were three men holding that bat.

The idea was to shoot this close up to establish the action while they keep me from being swept away. Then we'd go into a more distant profile for long stretches of milder water, where they can control the log and me.

Fine, we're shooting, then the wire goes pop, real soft, and- bang!- the log and I are in the rapids, and off to hell we go. I hear the guys yell and start into the rocks and

¹³⁵[Certain critics suggest that this replica of the Rocket was pulled with wires. I have looked and looked at this movie, and I, and various others, are convinced that it is a fully functioning steam engine, not a fake.]

¹³⁶[The first railway was opened in England on September 27, 1825.]

underbrush along the river. But I'm thinking about myself- think fast or forget it. I sure as shooting have to shed that log or it will beat me to death against the boulders. So I kick loose and sprint ahead. Can't look around, but I know that log is right on my tail. I'm hitting boulders now with my hipbones and knees, and a couple I hit so hard on my chest that I go clear up out of the water and over. The main thing is to keep from whirling. I'm fighting for breath and trying to remember how long the rapids are and how much of them are left.

It starts to quiet down, and I think, I've made it! Then suddenly I'm in foam a foot deep. You don't breathe very well in foam, and you sure as hell can't swim on top of it. I later found there was three hundred yards of that foam ganged up at the end of the rapids. It was a bend in the river that saved me. I grabbed some overhanging branches, pulled myself out, feet still in the water and just lay on my face fighting for air.

All of that took maybe a minute and a half, two minutes. It took Ernie Orsatti, the St. Louis Cardinal outfielder, Chick Collins- the stunt man who begged to do this sequence for me- Gabe, and the rest nearly ten minutes to fight through the underbrush. I don't suppose they knew what they would find.

First thing I asked was,
"Did Nat see it?" She was sitting there crocheting when we started the scene.
"I'm afraid she did." said Gabe.
Then I asked Lessley,
"Did you get it?"
"Both cameras. It's all on film." he said.
Gabourie offered to resign. I put a wet arm around his shoulder.
"You'll never make another mistake." I said. Gabe never did.

His cameramen were never allowed to cut until he said so. It didn't matter what happened, because something better could come out of it going wrong than what they had planned. He was in the river, and they had a holdback wire on him so that he would go at the same rate of speed that the camera was going. You can see in the film where the wire snapped. And that's all in the picture, because no matter what they were not allowed to cut. If he'd've drowned they'd've had a copy, a print of the drowning. They just kept going.

J.G. How did you stage the shot of rescuing the girl from the waterfall?

We had to build that dam; we built it in order to fit that trick. The set was built over a swimming pool, and we actually put up four eight-inch water pipes, with big pumps and motors to run them, to carry the water up from the pool to create our waterfall. The fall was about six inches deep. A couple of times I swung out underneath there and dropped upside down when I caught her. I had to go down to the doctor right there and then. They pumped out my ears and nostrils and drained me, because when a full volume of water like that comes down and hits you and you're upside down- then you really get it.

I think I got it on the third take. I missed the first two, but the third one I got it... And it's hard to realize that it was shot in 1923. it sounds like going back into ancient history.

Clyde Bruckman: "No one ever doubled for Buster. He rides the handlebars of the driverless motorcycle in Sherlock, flies through the air on a tree in Steamboat Bill, goes over the waterfall in Our Hospitality."

Harvey Parry: "To my knowledge Buster Keaton never had a double, I've heard a couple of fellows say they doubled him, but I have never seen this happen. Now, I don't believe, knowing Buster as well as I do, and doing things as good as I used to do, I don't believe I could have done them like he wanted them, he knew what he wanted, his fall was a different fall, he just didn't slip and fall down, he'd do a lot of things before he fell down. You can't double a guy like that doing those things." Harvey Parry, stuntman extraordinaire. ¹³⁷

Raymond Rohauer: "I would say, but weren't you ever hurt in any of these things, He'd say

"Oh! All the time,"..he said, "You see this thing here on the top of my head, well I got that from Seven Chances, you see this thing on my leg," and he pulled up his pant leg, " You see this scar here? I got that one from Sherlock Junior," He said, "You see this one here?" and he pulled up his shirt, "Well I got that from Battling Butler." You know, there was something from every film on his body."

That's Rohauer, not Buster, it's him making all these things more important to have something to say for print, when he'd be giving interviews or whatever. As I say, Buster got bruised and hurt a few times but he didn't talk about it much.

Well, you'd know better than Rohauer, did he have scars on his body?

No. He had one scar in the edge of his hair. No other scars that I noticed. He always had bruises. He didn't count bruises as important.

We've got people saying Buster could take any amount of pain for the sake of a movie, it's got to hurt...

Sure.

How did he feel about that?

He ignored it. He'd been getting lumps and bruises all his life, what's one more?

That was his attitude.

Didn't it ever worry you?

Well, I always wondered how he could stand... it looked like it was terribly painful, he didn't seem to care. So there was not much I could do about it.

Don't make a fuss, don't fuss about things like that, that was his attitude.

Exhibitors Herald: 'Nothing so novel or funny has ever been pictured.

Moving Picture World: 'Buster is going to wear out and lose out.

We played his Three Ages and this one and neither were anything to write home about. There were a few laughs but they could have been put in one reel. Better go back to two-reelers, Buster, you fit them.'

I'd been reading house notices since I was born, and was used to that. This critic likes you and this don't, so that's that. But I had a good story to tell and it rounded out swell and it was a big seller for me.

'The personal Keaton had a lifelong problem, it concerns reality. Teleology or 'who runs things around here?' is only part of Keaton's lifelong problem. More basic, if that is possible is the question, 'What world are we talking about?' Buster Keaton's early excursions into the world outside the theater, as in the Lake Muskegon summers, were pleasure outings, not business trips. He took the theater with him like his clothes. Off the stage he is the outlander, reality is a strange role that doesn't play right. Fundamentally he will never be able to figure out why? It is his problem, it is his unanswerable question, his wheel that turns forever.'

It's very poetic, but I don't know what he's talking about.

Do you think Buster would have done?

¹³⁷[This is 100% correct with reference to Buster's self-produced career, with exception of a pole vault in 'College', at MGM dangerous stunts were forbidden after 'Spite Marriage' and doubles were employed, with uninspired results.]

From Buster's viewpoint he really didn't care, about anything outside the theater or motion pictures. Let the rest of the world go do their thing, he'd do his. But surely his real world is very real, full of animals..
Oh yes, yes, but people speaking of 'real world', if they're talking about banking, politics, business, that was a total foreign thing to him.

A month after the final retake, Joe Roberts died. He had been with Buster three years, in every film from the second one on. Buster also lost a childhood friend from vaudeville, who shared his memories of stage and summers in Muskegon.

Dressed like Buster Brown. My God, he'd scare an audience half to death, like Man Mountain Dean romping around with a lollipop.¹³⁸

Each year the production boys hopefully prepared schedules for December twenty-fourth: shoot scenes all day. Hah! From the opening bell the madhouse was on- a ten-acre office party- gin, jazz, and Jezebels, milling all over the lot, through the sets, hopping all over town from studio to studio. Grips, cameramen, electricians, with stupid little presents, mobbing with stars and directors. Freeloading, yakking it up, and lapping it up. Carruthers cooked for two days- ham, turkey, duck, pie, cake- on Christmas Eve in my shack, you helped yourself. Carruthers stayed behind his bar serving drinks.

Carruthers real name was Willie Riddle. Returning from the war nearly four years before, Buster had tasted the Riddle cooking in a Santa Fe dining car. He hired him as "Cook, valet, wet nurse, errand boy, and secretary" until 1933.

<1924.>

February 3, 1924. Robert Keaton born.

By this time, having got two boys in our first three years, frankly, it looked as if my work was done. I was ruled ineligible. Lost my amateur standing. They said I was a pro. I was moved into my own bedroom.

Anita Loos: 'During Buster's lengthy ordeal, Nate gave birth to two boys, who might have cemented the union if they hadn't been taken over by Peg and spoiled by their aunties Norma and Dutch, who indulged the infants with disturbing gifts such as automobiles, when they would have been more comfortable with a set of building blocks or a jack-in-the-box.

Buster Keaton found an anodyne for the neglect he suffered at home; he took up rather heavy drinking, at which the entire Talmadge clan, led by his wife, ganged up on him.'

He always had a feeling about Natalie and the boys and why that broke up. He didn't like that breakup at all, ever, because he always felt that it was more the families decision than hers. The Talmadge decision. First of all they practically forced her to leave his bed, go sleep in a guest room, because she'd gotten pregnant twice and they didn't approve of that.

Why not?

"You people act like animals!" So forth and so on.

That seems pretty strange coming from Connie...

Well, it could have been Peg and Norma a lot too. But in any case that was the thing, they didn't want her having any more children, or getting pregnant anymore.

Why not?

¹³⁸[Man Mountain Dean, (Frank Simmons Leavitt,) 1891-1953. American wrestler whose colorful performances helped make professional wrestling popular. He also appeared in films.]

I don't know... it meant the world might know they were sleeping together I suppose, I don't know what their problems were. But that was the beginning of the break-up. She moved out of the bedroom and into another end of the house in her own suite. To keep the family happy as much as anything.

I'm amazed that the relationship lasted as long as it did after that..

Well, Buster told me he went to Peg, the mother and said...

"Look, this is the situation here." He says, "I'm just going to let you know right now I am not going to take a mistress and support her, or do anything like that. I will not be spending any money on women and throwing my money around. But," he says, "if I can't get it at home, I'm going to get it somewhere, and there's a lot of free stuff out there." He laid it right out to his mother-in-law.

"If you forbid your daughter to sleep with me, I'll go outside and get it."

Louise Brooks: 'Buster was very sexy, very relaxed and easy with women- the first sign of a man secure in his performance. I think he was capable of love but he was possessed rather than choosing to possess...'

He wasn't forceful, y'know.

Would you describe him as very sexy, very relaxed and easy with women?

Yes.

A man secure in his performance?

Yes.

Possessed rather than choosing to possess?

Well, he was very shy, he just stood back and let the ladies make the first approach, I'd imagine, that's what it sounds like to me.

And from that point on I think actually, I'd have to really sit down and figure it with the boys ages, but it was a combination of that, plus Joe Schenck shipping him to MGM without even asking, sending him to brother Nicholas at MGM, because he wanted to go to Twentieth Century Fox and run that studio, and it was a combination of the home life and the fact that he went to MGM and everybody jumped in to play with the new comic. In one early film of his at MGM there was seventeen writers on it, things like that. So that's where the heavy drinking started. It only lasted a couple or three years at the most.

Why should Buster allow his mother-in-law to run his wife's life?

He was not a fighter. He wouldn't fight about anything, ever. He'd rather punish himself by drinking.

Did he ever discuss it with Natalie?

I don't know. He never talked to me a lot about it. I got bare outlines and occasional... Myra never ever said anything. Louise would say something once in a while, and she was upset in a way with him running around sleeping around because she was very close friends with Natalie, but she didn't really understand the situation at the time, of why he was doing it. But he didn't take women out and spend money on them or anything, he'd get her in the bungalow at the studio, so it was all kind of q.t.¹³⁹, nobody really knew about it.

This seems very uncharacteristic, because Buster always took his responsibilities very seriously...

Well, the point was he still did financially, but he knew he wasn't wanted in that house.

Why did he let Natalie act that way?

Because her mother and two sisters were there backing her into a corner and explaining everything to her and telling her what to do all the time. I never heard

¹³⁹[quiet. K.H.]



anything but a very mild outline from Buster. It was far enough back that it didn't concern me in any way anyway. I never questioned him because it was painful for him, so I never talked about it.

He must have been more deeply upset than he could find any way of expressing whatsoever..

Well, I'm quite sure that was it. I guess he figured himself a failure, or figured everyone else would figure he was a failure, so he didn't discuss it. He just put it all inside. With anybody that ever brought up the subject I always used to say, "If anything upset him enough, and he got depressed enough about anything, he'd crawl into a bourbon bottle and stay there until he got so sick he quit." Because he used to get drunk and he'd stay drunk until he got sick and couldn't hold it down any longer and then he'd sober up and be sober. He was not an ordinary true alcoholic, in that a real alcoholic, if they smell a cork, they're gone. With him, he could drink a couple of bottles of beer a day for months and months and months and be perfectly happy about the whole thing, but something had to upset him badly before he'd go beyond that. That's a periodic drinker, not the type that would go off the deep end after one drink like a lot of them do. There's four or five kinds of alcoholism, and he was not the normal one. His was very deliberate. The whole last twenty years of his life he had a glass of beer before dinner every night, that was his cocktail before dinner, and that's all he ever had. An alcoholic couldn't do that. It was two major things that almost killed him, the breakup of his marriage and losing his studio and control of his career, that'd be enough to drive anybody up the wall. You don't need any other reasons.

If I'd been Buster, and I'd married Natalie, I would certainly have found Constance a distraction, particularly after the second child..

She always had a succession of boyfriends, one of her longer lasting boyfriends was one of Buster's best friends, Gilbert Roland, Amigo Roland was with Constance for a long time. She was married, five, six, eight times.

In 1924, I hired Robert E Sherwood,¹⁴⁰ then the movie critic of Life, the old humorous weekly, to write an original story for me. This was some years before Sherwood wrote 'The Road to Rome', his first Broadway comedy hit. One could tell, however, from the perceptive and amusing reviews he wrote that he had a true comedy mind. Bob had just been made managing editor of 'Life' when I hired him. But he said he would come out to Hollywood and try to write a story for me during his two weeks' summer vacation. Bob was six feet four inches tall, but I'll leave it to the psychologists to decide if that was the reason the story he wrote centered around a skyscraper.

In Sherwood's story the skyscraper is only half-finished. I was operating the elevator that carried the masons and bricklayers and steelworkers up and down to their jobs. One day the pretty daughter of the architect comes to look over the building. She accepts my shy invitation to let me take her to the top of the structure where she can enjoy the beautiful view. While we are up there a strike is called. Every worker in the place walks out. One of the men shuts off the power that operates the workmen's elevator.

But I discover that the elevator is not working only when we try to start down. Nothing I can do will make it move. And so there we are, trapped, isolated, high above ground, in the heart of the world's largest city. It is the middle of winter, and no one knows we are up there.

¹⁴⁰[March-April 1925.?]

As it gets dark we wave frantically at people in nearby buildings. They think we are very friendly characters and wave back.

It is the perfect situation for a Buster Keaton movie, with the indomitable little man facing what may seem impossible odds. And Bob Sherwood had thought up some clever devices. He had me building a shelter for the girl and myself with pieces of sheet metal and some loose nuts and bolts I found lying around on top of a girder. I make a receptacle to catch rain water in. Also a crude trap for pigeons and sea gulls, using some crumbs I find at the bottom of my lunch pail for bait.

I write a note in the girl's lip rouge, and with beating hearts we watch this flutter down, almost into an open window, then into the hands of a man on the street who reads it. Thinking it a joke he doesn't even look up, just shrugs and throws it away.

There was only one thing wrong with Sherwood's story. He couldn't think of a believable way to get us down from the top of the building, a place where we could not survive once snow fell. I told him that the finish couldn't be a simple thing like having me slide down the steel beams to the ground. Having a dirigible take us off the skyscraper would not do either. After all that build-up the audience would expect me to rescue the girl.

Sherwood went home without delivering the finish. His vacation was over, and he had to go back to his job in New York. Bob never did think of a finish.

Neither could we.¹⁴¹

I did not see Bob until sixteen years later. By that time he had written a whole sheaf of wonderful Broadway stage successes, including 'The Road to Rome', 'Waterloo Bridge', 'Idiot's Delight', 'The Petrified Forest', and 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois'.

That day in 1940 I was sitting in the lobby of the Dorchester Hotel in London. Suddenly lanky Bob Sherwood came in through the street door. He saw me out of the corner of his eye, but didn't stop. However, as he passed he whispered, "Stop worrying, Buster, I'll get you down off that building yet!"



¹⁴¹[Me neither. Can you? Many times I've seen, heard and read of story ideas that were rejected for lack of a finish which could in fact easily be rounded out, but this seems to me to be an exception']

CHAPTER TWENTY.

Oh, there were some great shots in that baby!
1924. Sherlock, Jr. Breaks neck.

APRIL. SHERLOCK JUNIOR.

The next picture was Sherlock Jr.... I did a lot of trick photography work in that thing.

How do you rate Sherlock Jr. Now?

I like Sherlock. It was a good picture for me. It was the trickiest of all the pictures I ever made because there are so many camera tricks and illusions. We spent an awful lot of time getting those scenes.

I laid out a few of these tricks, some of them tricks I knew from the stage. I got that batch of stuff together and said I can't do it and tell a legitimate story; because there are illusions, and some of them are clown gags, some Houdini, some Ching Ling Fu¹⁴², it's got to come in a dream; to get what we're after, gotta be a projectionist in a projecting room. Once you fall asleep, you visualise yourself as one of the important characters in the picture you're showing, and go down out of that projection room, go right down there, walk up onto the screen and become a part of it. That was the reason for making the whole picture. Just that one situation: that a motion picture projectionist in a theatre goes to sleep and visualises himself getting mixed up with the characters on the screen. All right, then my job was to transform those characters on the screen into my (the projectionist's) characters at home, and then I've got my plot. Now you tell your whole story.

Now to make it work was another thing; and after that picture was made every cameraman in Hollywood spent more than one night watching it and trying to figure out just how the hell we got some of those scenes. Oh, there were some great shots in that baby! I think the reason we started off on that story is because I had one of the best cameramen in the picture business, Elgin Lessley, he originally was with Sennett.

Was the stunt where you dive through the middle of the peddling woman trick photography?

No, there's no lighting effects, no mirrors or anything. And it's really a great trick and it shocks an audience.

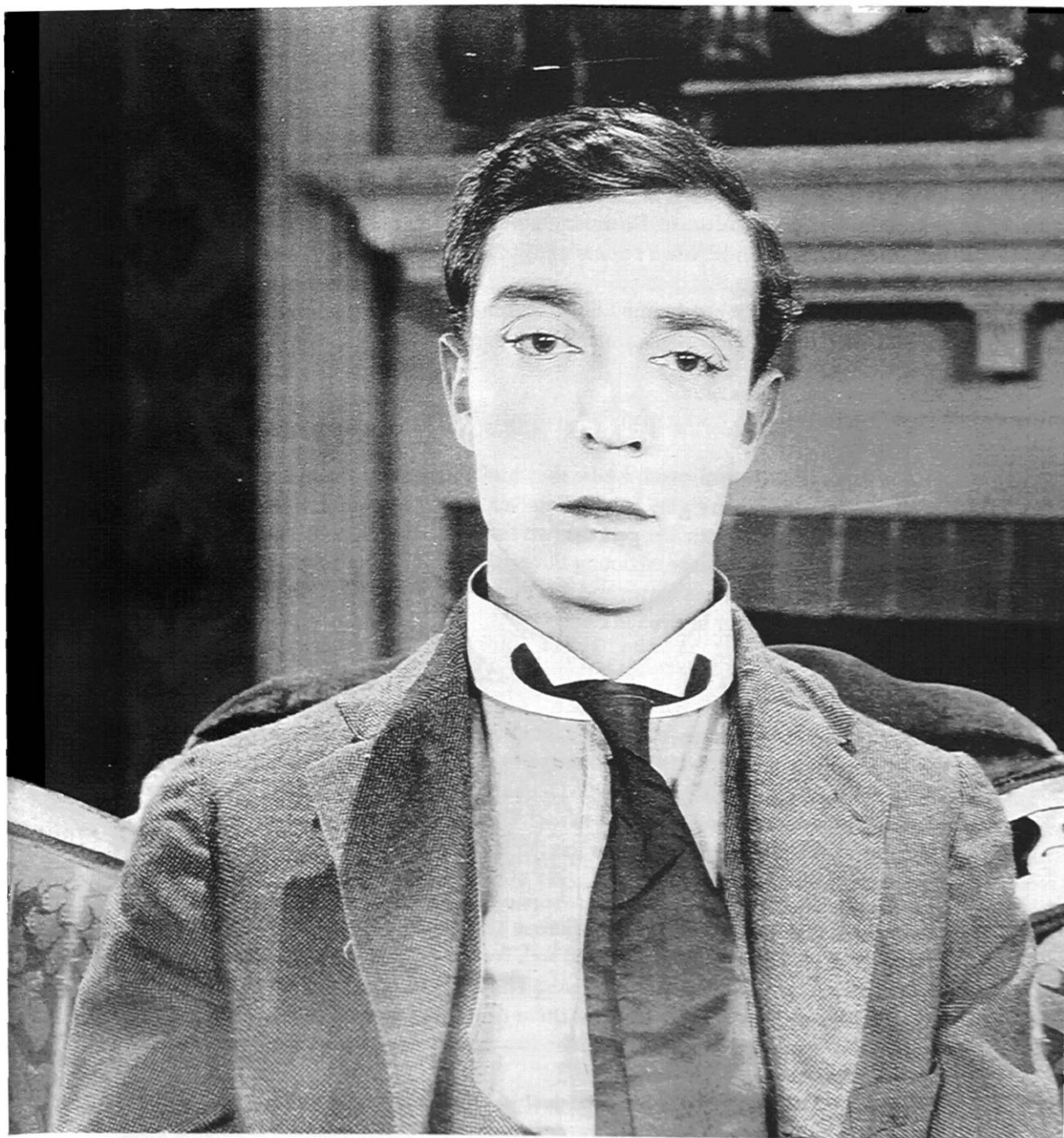
How did you actually do the sequence where you are near a tree, and then you are on a rock in the middle of the ocean. Was it some kind of back projection?

No, that hadn't been invented then. We call it processing, but back projection is correct. But it hadn't been invented then.

How was that done- did you have an actual screen beforehand on which the characters were appearing?

No. We built what looked like a motion picture screen and actually built a stage into that black cut-out frame, but lit it in such a way that it looked like a motion picture being projected on a screen. Then we built the front-row seats and orchestra pit and everything else. But it was real actors and the lighting effect gave us the illusion; so I could go out of semi-darkness, right from the front row of the theater, right into the picture on that well-lit screen. Then when it came to the scene changing on me when I got up there, that was a case of timing. On every one of those things we would measure the distance from the camera to where I was standing with a surveying outfit to get the exact height and angle, so that there wouldn't be a fraction of an inch missing

¹⁴²[Ching Ling Loo, real name Will E. Robinson, magician.]



on me; and then we changed the setting to what we wanted it to be and I got back into that same spot, and it overlapped the action to get the effect of the scene changing.

For the location shots, all we needed was the exact distance from the camera to where I was standing. When I stood on that rock I was going to jump into the ocean, but as I jumped the sea changed to something else. As I looked down I held still for a moment, and we ended the scene. Then we brought out tape measures, put a cross bar in front of the camera to square it off, and measured me from two angles. That made sure that I was in exactly the same spot as far as the camera was concerned. We also used surveyor's instruments to get me the same height, so that when we changed the scene and I went back on the set I was in exactly the same place as in the first shot. As we did one shot, we'd throw it in the darkroom and develop it right there and then- and bring it back to the cameraman. He cut out a few frames and put them in the camera gate. With that as a guide, when I come to change scenes, he could put me right square where I was, as long as that distance was correct. Then the cameraman just starts to crank and I jump; and when I jump I hit something else. I don't remember what I hit, but I hit something. That was all done just by changing the sets. But I on the screen never changed.

The illusion is perfect.

I know it was. I've seen it with many an audience.¹⁴³

I'm in the cage out at Universal, where they had all the animals at that time. It's a big round cage, about sixty to eighty feet in diameter, full of tropical foliage. With a whip and a chair and a gun, the trainer gets the two lions in position, and I go to mine. My cameraman is outside the cage, shooting through one hole. The trainer says, "Don't run, don't make a fast move, and don't go in a corner!"

Well, there *is* no corner in a round cage!

Buster laughed, pushed the table out of the way, and began to demonstrate. He re-created the scene from the film-within-a-film in *Sherlock, Jr.*, when he found himself flanked by lions. He did his unique Keaton walk across the room, whistling nonchalantly.

I start to walk away from one lion- and lookit, there's another one, there! I got about this far and glanced back and both of them were *that* far behind me, walking with me!" Buster was almost helpless with delighted laughter. "And I don't know these lions personally, see. They're both strangers to me! Then the cameraman says, "We've got to do the shot again for the foreign negative." I said, "Europe ain't gonna see this scene!"

More laughter, and then Buster returned to his seat, chuckling.

Years later, Will Rogers used that gag- 'Europe ain't gonna see this scene'.... we made a dupe negative out of that baby! I've worked with lions since, and some nice ones.

He was very brave working with animals. The lions in *Sherlock Jr.* in those transition scenes. The trainer had put them down in position and got Buster in the center of the ring between them. The two lions were almost between him and the door. And the trainer says,

"They should be fine, no problem, but just in case they make any moves, just slowly walk to the gate. Under no circumstances move fast because that will trigger them." So one of them did get up, and he walked (laughs) slowly, but he

¹⁴³[Note, if you wish to spot the flaw in this process, so far apparently uncommented upon, it is the fact that the audience shows jumpy behaviour during the cuts, but as everyone is watching Buster on the screen within the screen it is nigh untraceable, though obvious once noticed.]

said he never was so relieved in his life once he got outside that gate, because those were big male lions. He was shaking and sweating.

In the Three Ages, that wasn't a real lion, I think it was a stuffed suit, I'm sure it was, because it didn't even look very good, wasn't even a good example, that's why I was so sure.

Clyde Bruckman: The other gag was even tougher. On the face of it, it was impossible. It was in Sherlock Jr. We had a pool-table shot where he had to pocket a number of balls in one stroke of the cue. The camera at high level had to show it all happen.

Set up the balls. Whang away and miss. We worked an hour.

"You know, Buster," we said, "this thing can't be done."

This made him mad.

"It can be done. Give me fifteen minutes with those stupid goddamn balls."

He coated each ball with white chalk, then shot it separately into the proper pocket. Each ball left the line of its path on the green felt. Then Buster placed each ball exactly where the line indicated, called,

"Camera!" and took one shot and pocketed them all. Publicity men would call that genius; to Buster it was all in a day's work.

"No man can be a genius in slapshoes and a flat hat."

[Quoted at second hand by an uncredited source. Possibly a distortion of.....]

Like anyone else I enjoy being called a genius. But I cannot take it seriously.

MOTOR BIKIN' ON THE BARS.

[Kids, don't try this at home.]

James Agee: 'Keaton was a wonderfully resourceful inventor of mechanistic gags as he ran afoul of locomotives, steamships, prefabricated and over-electrified houses, he put himself through some of the hardest and cleverest punishment ever designed for laughs. In Sherlock Jr., boiling along on the handlebars of a motorcycle quite unaware that he has lost his driver, Keaton whips through city traffic, breaks up a tug-of-war, gets a shovelful of dirt in the face from each of a long line of Rockette-timed ditch-diggers, approaches a log at high speed which is hinged open by dynamite precisely soon enough to let him through and, hitting an obstruction, leaves the handlebars like an arrow leaving a bow, whams through the window of the shack in which the heroine is about to be violated, hits the heavy feet-first, knocking him through the opposite wall. The whole sequence is as clean in motion as the trajectory of a bullet.'

How did you ever do the scene on the motorcycle in Sherlock Jr.? Is that a camera trick, or were you actually-

No there's no camera trick there.

There is one shot where you can see the motorcycle from a distance and see that it isn't attached to anything. [Actually there are many] How did you manage to learn to do that?

I'd just go out and learn to handle a motorcycle on the handlebars. It wasn't easy to keep a balance. Number one, I've got no brakes- there are only foot brakes, see.

Well, that was a hell of a job. I got some beautiful spills though, from that thing, some real beauties.

The gag was this: I call a motorcycle cop, Gillette, a friend who was driving the machine, jump on his handlebars and I was to be riding the handlebars when we hit a bump in the street which knocks him off and I lose him. And I continue on through Los

Angeles traffic, not knowing the driver has been spilled, but actually driving the motorcycle myself. You know the scene.

Well, the cop that fell off the motorcycle- that was me. I doubled him because he couldn't fall off the motorcycle, so I took Ernie Orsatti, my assistant prop man, who was my size- put my clothes on him to be on the handlebars, and I put Gillette's things on, on the back seat and, of course, fell off.

Then I had to do the scene where I ride on a motorcycle, under its own power, sitting on the handlebars. One part of the scene showed me driving along a city street where laborers were digging a ditch and tossing out dirt which is supposed to hit me. Ernie Orsatti was in the ditch with a shovel of packed sawdust, and as I rode by he threw it out and hit me in the face, blinding me. I hit both cameras, breaking them to pieces, knocked down the director [Eddie Cline], scattered the extra people and finally collided with an automobile. I hit it head-on and parked right on top of it. I ended up with my fanny up against the windshield, my feet straight in the air! But I was not seriously injured.

I developed more stunt men than any studio in Los Angeles. I've taken the goddamnedest people and made stunt men out of them. You know this Frank McGrath on Wagon Train- the cook, with the beard?

He was my chauffeur, I'm on location and I run out of actors, so I say "Put makeup on him- make him get in there." That's how he started. I never used stuntmen for myself- I used to double for them.

We paid no attention to footage. First of all, we were making five-reelers; then, in 1925, we went to seven-reelers because everyone else did. As for the amount of raw stock we used, we never paid the slightest attention to it. We could generally tell when we were over footage, but we didn't mind. It's much better to be able to cut and throw away than go short. We shot our two-reelers in the same way. Say we shot a scene eight times. Well, we didn't print all those takes. The second and fourth were pretty good- just print those two, that's all. The others were thrown away.¹⁴⁴

ROSCOE DIRECTS SHERLOCK?

As far as Arbuckle working afterwards, he worked quite a bit under fake names because he wasn't allowed to work under his own name. Buster tried to use him in Sherlock Jnr., and wasn't able to because Roscoe was so bitter, and so hurt, that nothing whatever was funny to him; and after working for a couple of weeks they realized it wasn't going to work because he had no comedic judgement left, and Buster had to take him off the film and hire somebody else.

According to Doris Deane, [Yallop and others] Arbuckle's second wife, Arbuckle wrote and directed Sherlock Jr. as well as other Keaton pictures for which he was not given screen credit.

'Fraid not. I never heard anything about that from anybody; because I knew Clyde Bruckman quite well, Ebba Sedgwick who was Ed Sedgwick's' wife, had been Jean Havez' wife before that, before he died, and different people that had been involved with the company, I knew Marian Mack quite well, and people like that, and I never heard Roscoe's name mentioned ever, including from Buster, except that one time when he was talking about trying to use him and he wasn't able to, and that was very shortly after the trial. It's possible, maybe he

¹⁴⁴[And recycled for the silver content in the silver nitrate if the normal practice was followed at Buster's studio.]



tried to consult him on story, writing situations, before they'd go into production or something, just to try to bring him out of his depression.

Did you actually say this [from 'Frame-up.']: - 'Buster used him on other pictures but he didn't get credit.'?

No, I don't think so. It doesn't sound likely to me.

So this woman is playing fast and loose with your quotations?

Could be, yuh.¹⁴⁵

We were about to start Sherlock, Jr. in 1924 when I decided that I must do something for my pal, Roscoe. More than three years had passed since his acquittal by a jury that said an apology was due him - but he was still barred from acting in pictures.

Roscoe was down in the dumps and broke. He had been unable to pay the staggering legal fees demanded of him after the three trials. Quietly, Joe Schenck had picked up the tab of more than \$100,000 for him.¹⁴⁶

Roscoe had taken a trip around the world, then tried vaudeville. Finally he made appearances at the Cotton Club, a Culver City night club.

Nobody but friends of his and curiosity seekers went to see him. And it was a dismal experience to watch him. Roscoe just was not funny any more, was like some washed-up old performer who knew he was through and was just going through the motions because he had no alternative.

When he finished his engagement at the Cotton Club I suggested to Lou Anger that we give Roscoe a job directing Sherlock, Jr.¹⁴⁷

Lou said it could be arranged, but that he daren't use his real name, we better get him to use some other name.

So I suggested, 'Will B. Good.' Well, that's all right for a laugh, but it was considered too facetious, so I give him the name William Goodrich. All right we decided, that's it.¹⁴⁸

The experiment was a failure. At the end of about three days' shooting we notice a mistake. He's now so irritable and impatient that he loses his temper easily. Roscoe snapped at everyone in the company. He screams at people, gets flushed and mad - and of course, things don't go well. He had my leading lady, Kathryn McGuire, in tears a dozen times each day. He hadn't recovered from those trials, of being accused of murder and nearly convicted. It just changed his disposition. In other words, it made a nervous wreck out of him.

One day, after Roscoe went home, the gang of us sat around trying to figure out what to do next. It was obvious that we couldn't make the picture with a man directing whose self-confidence was gone, whose nerves were all shot. The question was which of us would have the heart to tell Arbuckle he was through?

It was Lou Anger, bless him, who thought of a way out. He said that Hearst, who was producing Marion Davies's pictures, was looking for a director for her new one, a film version of the old Victor Herbert musical, 'The Red Mill'.

¹⁴⁵[Roscoe does however appear as a fat lady in a shop in Go West.]

¹⁴⁶[Multiply by a factor of at least ten to get modern values.]

¹⁴⁷[Yallop states baldly that 'Roscoe directed the picture from start to finish, and provided the story idea as well.' Said idea, Yallop states, is based on the courtroom antics of two 'expert witnesses' at his trial. As Buster never said whose idea it was, this last would not surprise me, but I would have expected Buster to give credit to Roscoe wherever possible. As to Roscoe directing, the reader will have to decide. See Eleanor above.]

¹⁴⁸[As Yallop points out, Roscoe's Father was named William Goodrich Arbuckle. Unfortunately, this short paragraph rates as the most often misused Buster quote.]

"Hearst," he said, "has already interviewed two well-known directors but doubts that either can do the job. He and Marion have always admired Roscoe's directing. They've told me so. They also feel sorry for him now." It seemed to us quite possible that Roscoe, with a new gang to work with and on another sort of picture, might turn in a good job.

I happened to know that Marion was having a few friends to dinner that evening at her beach house. I was eager to talk to her about taking Roscoe as a director before approaching Hearst. I counted on Marion's good heart, and I knew that she could get the publisher to do almost anything she wanted. That evening I drove out to Santa Monica to see her. She invited me to join her dinner party.

"No thanks," I said, "I would like a few minutes with you alone."

Marion led me to another room, and there I told her of the terrible state Roscoe was in.

"One directing job," I said, "even if he had to do it under another name, might make all the difference in the world to him, might get him started all over again."

It was typical of Marion that she did not ask me why, if I felt so badly, I didn't let Roscoe direct one of my pictures. I was relieved that she didn't. The last thing I wanted to tell her was that we'd had no luck trying to work with him. I said, "I am just about to start my new picture with him directing. But I'd be tickled to death if you would let him do yours instead. Yours is so much bigger a production. Also he would realize he was getting the chance because you and W.R. always liked his work. Roscoe and I are such close pals that getting a job from me wouldn't mean anything. He might misinterpret it as merely an act of friendship. He'd think it was charity."....

Marion sold the idea to Hearst. I think it helped that Hearst had never believed what his newspapers printed about Roscoe during his trouble.¹⁴⁹

Over the weekend Roscoe called up Lou Anger in great excitement. He was in a dilemma. To his amazement Hearst wanted him to direct Marion's new picture - and the Davies pictures were all lavish productions costing over a million in a day when million-dollar pictures were rare.

"What am I going to do, Lou?" he said. "I can't let Buster down."

"Don't worry about Buster." Lou said. "Grab this big chance, Roscoe. Buster will finish it himself."

This is too great an opportunity, Roscoe. We hate to lose you, but-

Roscoe used the name William Goodrich in the credits. And 'The Red Mill', oddly enough, was a pretty good picture. Roscoe had somehow managed to do a first-rate directing job on that period show.

The lift directing it gave to his spirits did not last long unfortunately. In 1927 he made a road tour in 'Baby Mine', the stage farce, but with little success. The next year he was hooted in Paris when he appeared there. Not because of the scandal. The French just didn't find the once-great comic funny any more. Yet only a few years

¹⁴⁹[Hearst is one of the most enigmatic figures in the history of twentieth century art, even if we ignore his role as inspiration for 'Citizen Kane'. On the one hand he happily sells newspapers which destroy Roscoe's career, while apparently not believing a word of it [Hearst knew the movie colony intimately], and on the other he single handedly supports the career of George Herriman, now generally agreed to be the finest artist ever to produce comic strips, over a period of 20 years or so in the teeth of a concerted campaign by his circulation managers to remove him. A definitive biography is called for by a writer of Yallop's quality.]

before he had been worshipped so in Paris that the government allowed him to place a wreath on the tomb of its Unknown Soldier.¹⁵⁰

BREAKS NECK.

'When 'Suicide' Buddy Mason was asked if there was any standard by which stunt men were judged- by other stunt men- he replied, "Nope. It's just- well, when you get so they call you by your first name when you come into the hospital, then you belong."' (Photoplay. Nov.1927.)

I broke my neck while making Sherlock, Jr. but I did not even know about it until long afterward- years later. One day when my doctor was giving me a physical checkup, he asked me when I'd sustained the fracture which, of course, had completely healed by then. I had to think for quite a while before figuring out that it must have happened during a sequence of Sherlock, Jr.

In this scene I was running along the top of a freight train and I grabbed the rope dangling from a water tower to swing off to the ground. This set up the gag; of course all my full weight pulls on the rope and, of course, I pull the spout down and it drenches me with the water. Well, when you're up on top of a freight car you're up there twelve feet high and that water spout is a ten-inch pipe... I didn't know how strong that water pressure was, we underestimated the volume of water that would fall on me from that spout. The stream struck me so hard it tore loose my grip on the rope as if I had no grip at all and dropped me the minute it hit me. And I lit on my back, I fell back on the track with my neck snapped down square across the steel rail. Right here-

[he points to the back of his neck.]

It was a pretty hard fall, and that water pushed me down. I'm pretty sure that's when I did it. I had a headache for a few hours, I remember.

Mildred Harris's house was nearby, and she gave me a couple of stiff drinks- this was during Prohibition, when you couldn't just stop anywhere for a drink.

I woke up the next morning and my head was clear, and I never stopped working. Conditioning is the one thing, I suppose, that can enable a man to walk around unaware that he has a broken neck.¹⁵¹

How did Sherlock Jr. stand up?

Hospitality outgrossed it, Battling Butler outgrossed it, College outgrossed it, Steamboat Bill outgrossed it. And then at M-G-M, The Cameraman and Spite Marriage outgrossed it. It was all right, it was a money maker, but it wasn't one of the big ones. Maybe it was because at the time it was released the audience didn't pay so much attention to the trick stunts that were in the picture.

¹⁵⁰[In his book, 'The Day The Laughter Stopped' David Yallop states that the whole deal of getting Roscoe a job directing 'The Red Mill' was impossible as it wasn't made until three years later. Yallop also insists that Roscoe was not in anything like as bad a state as Buster suggests above, and that Buster is overdoing it, possibly to enlist retrospective sympathy for Arbuckle. Yallop explains that The French press also reported this appearance in the same terms. Roscoe had been told he would appear in front of an English speaking audience, but this proved incorrect. On the second night Roscoe had had his act translated into French, and finished his run to capacity business.]

¹⁵¹[Buster neglects to mention that the shot in question is a long set piece where, having run the length of the train on the roof, he grabs the water spout and is thrown to the track, two men on a hand cart then come into shot, get drenched and chase Buster over the horizon before the next edit. So he not only broke his neck, but he immediately got up and did a long distance sprint.]

Photoplay. July 1924: 'This is by no means Keaton's most hilarious offering, but it is short, snappy and amusing. Comedies are like oases in a celluloid world, rare and refreshing, and you don't want to miss Buster with his immobile face and unique composure in his new setting.'



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE.

Shanghaied by Fate.

1924. Navigator. Rubber fish.

THE NAVIGATOR. OCTOBER. METRO-GOLDWYN.

Now, tell me about The Navigator. That's your favorite film?

Yeah. I was sitting around the studio with the scenario outfit between pictures, this was in '23, and we happen to hit a rut and we're all fishin' around for somethin', groping for a good idea; and nobody could think of anything that looked worthwhile. But at that time Frank Lloyd was making a picture for Metro (which was right across the street from our studio,) called 'The Sea Hawk', and that called for about five fourteenth century sailing vessels.

I had a great technical man, Fred Gabourie, and they borrowed him from me and sent him up to San Francisco to see if he could find any old four-masted schooner hulls. Frank had to have four or five in a fleet or something like that for the picture. So he was up and down the Pacific Coast lookin' for those hulls that they could build up into those pirate ships. And while he was up there looking for these four-masted schooners- those that could be repaired enough to use- he found this ocean liner up there that they were going to salvage.

He had just gotten back in town, and he says,

"I told you a long time ago that I'd get you a real boat. Well, while I was in 'Frisco, I ran into a real honest-to-God ocean liner- 500 foot long- a passenger ship." Says, "And they're just about to sell it for junk. You can do anything you damn please with her- sail her, burn her, blow her up, sink her."

"Don't the people care?"

"Hell, they want to get rid of her- sell her or rent her. Gonna be junked. Only thing, you gotta move fast. In twenty-four hours they move in with blowtorches."

It was called the Buford.¹⁵² She was very much in the press at one time because I believe it was the boat that brought the last Princess, or Duchess- or somethin' - of Russia out the night before that slaughter took place over there, with the Czar of Russia and his family. So they sneaked her over to this country from Russia, smuggled her out I guess..

Bruckman said. "What a prop for Bus, an ocean liner!"

(Bruckman had once tried to describe to a visitor what it was that Buster did with props.

"He can take a ladder, a pail- hell, a stick!- and have you rolling on the ground. He does something..... he makes the thing alive.")

And we found out that you could have this boat for twenty-five thousand dollars.....

Buy it! I say,

"She's rented. Clyde, go with Gabe and send a wire. Sign my name."

Well, we went to work right then and there, and set out to see what we could do with it. Says,

"Now, what could we do with an ocean liner?" I say,

"Sink her? I'll say not. No, it's not the money." I reminded them of the Rolls Royce we had beat up in The Blacksmith only two years before.

"You guys remember that dud." I said. "If we sink a beautiful ocean liner, they'll hiss. You could do it in a tragedy, where it's serious, or in an out-and-out farce, where it doesn't really happen. But you can't do it in a comedy like this. Those same people

¹⁵²[Or possibly Beaufort. According to 'Hard Act to Follow' the Buford was also used for the forcible deportation of alleged bolsheviks to Russia in 1919.]



who wished they had a Rolls would be wishing they could inherit a liner just like I had, or even just take a trip on one."

[...The ship, however, would not be dunked. To ensure that, Buster rented her rather than bought her...]

Havez says,

"Well, we can make a dead ship out of it. No lights aboard. No steam. No water running. Just afloat."

How could we get it afloat? Well, we set out to figure out how to do that and to write a story around it.

Havez said

"I've got it. I want a rich boy and a rich girl who never had to lift a finger, always someone to wait on 'em- houses full of butlers, maids, valets, chauffeurs. I put those two beautiful, spoiled brats- the two most helpless people in the world- adrift on a ship, all alone."

Well, we got our start. Our start was a pip. Havez' basic idea was good, marooning a rich boy and a rich girl on a derelict ship.

Only to get a boy and a girl alone and adrift on the Pacific Ocean...

So we plant the characters so that the audience knows that she never saw a kitchen in her life, doesn't know how to boil a cup of tea. ...

I take a couple of very rich people to establish a beautiful home in San Francisco, up on the hill. I'm Rollo Treadway, a young bachelor, very young at the time, the son of a very wealthy man in San Francisco...a really useless young millionaire who can't even shave himself. I've been waited on all my life with valets, chauffeurs, private tutors and all kinds of servants. So *I* don't know what I'm doin'. And the girl was the same thing. Her father was a ship owner, a wealthy ship owner, and she had servants to wait on her and everything else. So you know they'd been raised with a silver spoon in their mouths from the time they were born. Take those two characters, and set 'em adrift in the Pacific Ocean on a dead ship. Well, that's *The Navigator*. And it worked out beautifully.

Of course, it took some figuring to get us both aboard separately and the ship set adrift and still keep it believable, but we did. We worked it out....

The opening gag in that picture is one of the most stolen gags that was ever done on the screen. I think I knew at one time of 27 times it had been done by other companies. With us, the gag was more to establish the fact that I was so helpless.

I went to call on the girl, and I came down and got in my car in front of my house, a big open Pearce-Arrow Phaeton- with a chauffeur *and* a footman. The footman wrapped a blanket around my knees- and the car just drove across the street to her house. And I got out and called on the girl. I just went in there and proposed to this girl, says,

"Will you marry me?" And she says,

"No."

She wants no part of me, my money, or my position. Doesn't need any of it.

I came back down with my head down and the footman opened the car door for me and I said,

"No, I think the walk will do me good." So I walked back across the street with the car followin' me makin' a U-turn. That's all.

The plot was that I had already sent down for tickets to go on a honeymoon and my butler advised Honolulu. So when I got home he handed me the tickets. But I had nobody to go with, so I tear up one ticket and I put the other in my pocket. I says,

"What time does it sail?" He says,

"Nine o'clock." I says,

"In the morning?" He says,

"Yeah." I says,

"That's too early, so I'll go aboard tonight."

All right. Now we want the night shot, and we showed the night watchman coming out with his punch clock. I was supposed to go to pier 2, and we see this watchman come up to punch at this pier. He slides the gate over the 12, but the gate hides the 1 and the 2 was still showing. And I see it from the car and decide that's the ship. Oh- and here's your plot- we went to a bunch of men in a building overlooking the bay of San Francisco, and looking down at the boat at the pier. One of them says, "That boat has been bought by our enemies, the country that we're on the verge of war against. That ship will carry ammunition and supplies. It's up to us to see that she doesn't get there." He says, "Tonight, we'll go down there, we'll overcome the night watchman, and anybody else that gets in our way, throw her ropes off or cut them off and set that boat adrift. The wind will do the rest. It's a cinch to go up against those rocks on the other side of the Golden Gate and it's a doomed ship." That's the plot.

So, I come down and get on this boat. Now, there's nobody to meet me. It's dark, there's no lights. There's no water. It's a dead ship. Nothing running. But I finally find my stateroom, and when I get inside I have to light matches to see what I'm doing as I put myself to bed.

About this time, those foreign agents arrive and overpower the watchman. And they go out to set this boat free. And they no more complete their job, they ignore the gang plank that goes onto the ship; but you could see that the ship is going away from the pier and that gang plank is just sliding.

The girl and her father are all dressed up to go to a dinner party someplace and she brings the car to a stop- she's driving a coupe, and he says, "I had to have you drive me down past the Navigator, because I left some papers in the pilot house that I want and I'll only be a few minutes."

He comes down to this pier and he runs into these agents. Well, they grab him, but before they can put a handkerchief on him, he yells 'Help'. She hears it in the car.

Well, they drag him into this little shed to bind him up. She doesn't know that but passes on down and goes over the gang plank onto the ship. She no more gets onto the ship when the ship is far enough away from the dock that the gang plank falls and she's on the ship, and it fades out.

So there we are, neither one knowing the other's on the ship.

That was the beginning of The Navigator. Now this is the same construction. We got our start and jumped to the finish.

Bruckman: "In that particular period of the 1920's we were trying to shake the pattern of the final chase. A hard thing to do, it was set in the public mind. Buster was always saying,

"The chase is just one form of climax. It works so well because it speeds up the tempo, generally involves the whole cast, and puts the whole outcome of the story on the block."

"We didn't have another liner to chase the one we had. We had to try to come up with another climax."

Havez said

"Can we dunk the boss this time!" everyone laughed. The whole staff had a superstitious belief that immersing Keaton ensured a successful picture."

Then we knew the finish. The finish was that I finally drifted over to a South Sea Island and met a batch of head hunters and cannibals, legitimate, not burlesque, and had to fight them off.

...finally they take the ship, Bruckman said

"The real end, the story really ended when you two dove in and sank."

Yes, the real end. Oh, it was in the books for us to die all right. But not in the jokebooks. We were making a comedy, remember?
[Anyway] We figured out how to do that. Then that rounded that out. Then we went back to work on the middle...

...There we were, neither one of us knowing the other was on board, floating out to sea- drifting off to nowhere in the dead of night.

Well, it's morning. I wake up, go out on deck. See no one. Go to the dining saloon. No one there- no passengers, no waiters. I think I'm the first one up- sit and wait. No one appears. Go to the kitchen. Not a soul. It's gradually dawning on the old Slow Thinker that he's on a deserted ship. Meanwhile the girl is in a panic, looking all over to find someone alive on board.

Bruckman: "A Buford built for two."

H.F. How did you set up the scene where the boy and girl keep missing each other?

We set the camera out on the bow of the ship so it could take in three decks, and just set down and talk it over with the girl- tell her how fast to travel, where to look, how to come down the stairs and look, and go back up and so forth, until we laid out the chase, and then go head and shoot it. I don't remember the cuts.

James Agee: 'Adrift on a ship which he believes is otherwise empty, he drops a lighted cigarette. The girl finds it. She calls out and he hears her; each then tries to find the other. First each walks purposefully down the long, vacant starboard deck, the girl, then Keaton, turning the corner just in time not to see each other. Next time around each of them is trotting briskly, very much in earnest; going at the same pace, they miss each other just the same. Next time around each of them is going like a bat out of hell. Again they miss. Then the camera withdraws to a point of vantage at the stern, leans its chin in its hand and just watches the whole intricate superstructure of the ship as the protagonists stroll, steal and scuttle from level to level, up, down and sidewise, always managing to miss each other by hair's-breadths, in an enchantingly neat and elaborate bit of timing. There are no subsidiary gags to get laughs in this sequence and there is little loud laughter; merely a steadily increasing kind of delight. When Keaton has got all he can out of this fine modification of the movie chase he invents a fine device to bring the two together: the girl, thoroughly winded, sits down for a breather, indoors, on a plank which workmen have left across sawhorses. Keaton pauses on an upper deck, equally winded and puzzled. What follows happens in a couple of seconds at most: air suction whips his silk topper backward down a ventilator; grabbing frantically for it; he backs against the lip of the ventilator; jackknives and falls in backward. Instantly the camera cuts back to the girl. A topper falls through the ceiling and lands tidily, right side up, on the plank beside her. Before she can look more than startled, its owner follows, head between his knees, crushes the topper, breaks the plank with the point of his spine and proceeds to the floor. The breaking of the plank smacks boy and girl together.'

[Buster looks at the girl and asks, 'Will you marry me,' just as he had when last he spoke to her. She replies, "No."]

I said

"You see Clyde, we got in a chase after all. If you had done that to Adam and Eve, there would be no human race."

But we finally met; neither one has ever been in a kitchen before in their lives. She wouldn't know how to make a cup of tea, he's worse. All the money in the world and it doesn't help him boil an egg, you see... You put her in a ship's galley where it takes two people to pick up a spoon or lift a frying pan; the coffee pot holds ten gallons,

and the soup tureen holds twenty... You see the trouble we got her in. And a Jack-of-all-trades is something I never heard of, so I'm not very handy around the place either. I mean, you couldn't get two more helpless people.

When we first laid out the story of *The Navigator* ahead, a few dramatic scenes at the start of it were legitimate and not done in a comedy way, I had mobs stuffed in there, such as the cannibal island we got onto, and things like that- you get a good dramatic director to take care of those sequences in the picture. We won't worry about the comedy part of it, we take care of that. We do that. The only mistake we made there, and that was [hiring] Donald Crisp- he was strictly from the D.W. Griffith school, a topnotch dramatic man- he had just made one of the best pictures for Paramount that year called 'The Goose Woman'.¹⁵³

Well, we started, and he directed the dramatic stuff all right, but he wasn't fussy about it. He wasn't interested in the dramatic scenes, he was only interested in the comedy scenes I was in. He turned gag man overnight on me! He came to work in the morning with the goddamndest gags you ever heard of in your life. Wild! We told him not to worry about the gag department. We'd take care of that. We didn't want him as a gag man, for God's sake! But we did manage to pull through the picture all right.

We let him go before we did the underwater scene. That was a tedious job, and a lot of trouble to us. A director can't do anything with a scene like that; it's strictly between me and the cameraman and the technical man.

Actually, after I let him go, I went back and shot a couple of dramatic scenes again. One of them was when they'd dragged the girl onto the cannibal island and all those black feet were around her and we went to her close-up, surrounded by feet. He shot it in such a way that it looked like all she was doing was smelling feet. Well, that we didn't want. It would be perfectly natural if we were looking for laughs- but we weren't. Not at this point.¹⁵⁴

So I shot it again so she wasn't half-unconscious and their feet weren't bringing her to, or something. I just had her looking more scared.

Then there was another scene in the first part when Crisp let the spies who cut the boat loose do a little overacting. I was always a little fussy over that. I don't like overacting.

While making *The Navigator* I was almost strangled. The gag called for me to be smoking a cigarette when the girl tried to put my diving helmet on. I left the cigarette in my mouth while I reached up to help her get it on. Accidentally, she gave it a half twist, locking it. The smoke from the cigarette threw me into a frenzy of coughing, and everyone just thinks I'm working up a gag. Conditioning couldn't help me out of that jam, of course, but an alert co-worker did. Fortunately, Ernie Orsatti, the St. Louis Cardinal's ballplayer who was working with our crew, noticed the trouble I was in and twisted off the helmet in the nick of time.

¹⁵³[Donald Crisp was a veteran of the earliest Griffith days, he worked on 'Birth of a Nation' and directed films for Reliance-Majestic and Mutual. I have seen the first reel of 'The Goose Woman' and it is remarkably beautiful, but it was actually made by Clarence Brown. It should be remembered that Buster had a lifelong inability to remember people's names, but whether he hired Crisp under the impression that this film was made by him, or whether the mistake is in the compiling of the book, there is not enough evidence to decide.]

¹⁵⁴[also note, it would be a joke about bad smells, a common feature of Chaplin, Langdon and Lloyd, but totally absent from Buster's work. Buster got a comic revenge on Crisp by using a photo of Crisp as the scary face in the porthole. Crisp also had an acting career as a 'Heavy'.]

James Agee: 'There is a ghostly, unforgettable moment in the Navigator when, on a deserted, softly rolling ship, all the pale doors along a deck swing open as one behind Keaton and, as one, slam shut, in a hair-raising illusion of noise.'

How did you make the scene with all the doors swinging behind you?

Well, you have to go to the top of the door and use thin enough wire that it can't possibly photograph, and control 'em all the length of the decks; so that one batch of men down here pull 'em open, and a batch over here could close 'em. And then we put the camera on a tripod that has a big weight hanging down, so by a man standing there and moving that weight in a figure eight, the camera gives the impression of the ship rolling. Well, the only thing we have to make sure of is when they take the camera over to this side that the doors open and as it sways back the doors close. Well on the screen it looks like that boat went over to about a thirty-three-degree angle and back. And then I leaned in the opposite direction like you would normally walk on the deck of a rolling ship. When everybody got timed together with doors and cameras moving in the right direction, and me moving in the right direction at the same time, you got your scene.¹⁵⁵

SHOOTING UNDERWATER.

What makes the public laugh? Now, though I neither laugh nor smile on the screen, it is my business to get smiles and laughs, principally laughs, out of audiences. We can only judge by our experience, and by tests and observances of audiences in actual moving-picture theaters. Usually when a comedy is completed in a studio there are hurry calls for everyone who appeared in it, and sets are put up again because it has been found necessary to retake early scenes. On the stage it is possible to form a certain routine for an act. If a thing doesn't go at a matinee it can be taken out at night. I do not care who the performer is, whether he is the humble supper chaser who gets the bad spots in a bill and plays three times, at least, a day, or the star act in the best position, he is influenced by his audience. The empty seats get you- and so do the occupied ones if they are not responsive. Now, in films we are constantly without the benefit of an audience during the process of making our picture. It is an old story in Hollywood that the things we think are irresistible are the very things that the public can sit through in stony silence.

It seems to me that we can get more comedy out of an original story like The Navigator, than from a play or book that has already found favor with the public. We can sit around and discuss gags, and put in plot when it is needed. The idea is more important than the plot. We can also, when we build up and develop our story, put in a serious or pathetic moment or two.¹⁵⁶ These, of course, are no more than the light and shade which make for the best comedy, whether on the stage or on the screen. It has

¹⁵⁵[a classic case of why two different cameras might get quite different takes of the same shot/scene. Hence European and American prints will show differences just shot by shot, let alone editing.]

¹⁵⁶[Note that this means the idea, the plot, and the story are separate entities. The idea is essentially cinematic, the story is the story, and the plot is the mechanics of making the story work. E.G. In the Navigator, the idea is the deserted ship, the story is the survival of the spoilt brats, and the plot is the foreign agents setting the ship adrift.]

been found in farces on the stage that there can be such a thing as too many laughs, that they can follow too close together for all of them to register. This is true with the elaborated screen comedy. Of course, the comedian's quiet bits or serious bits should not be held too long. They will seem dull. But how long a moment of pathos in a comedy may be allowed to run is like the timing of a gag. We can argue the question, work over it and experiment in the studio, but it is the audience that gives us the answer. We can merely guess and try things once, as the saying is. It is like the answer to the question: 'What makes 'em laugh?' We don't know.

There was also the matter of timing. Just as in vaudeville, you lost the laugh when you threw a gag at them too quickly, or for that matter too slowly. The difference was that on stage you had the chance to test and retest your comedy material before live audiences. The customers only saw a gag or comedy scene in a movie after it was made, cut, and in the can. Often it was expensive remaking scenes with brand new gags in them. And that's how the protection or alternate gag was born.

Another interesting thing I learned later was that once you got the audience interested in what the hero was doing they deeply resented anything that interrupted him. It didn't matter what terrific gag you gave them. I had this demonstrated to me when we were previewing *The Navigator*.

It had always occurred to me that there was a good deal of comedy to be found under the sea, and I ordered a regulation diver's suit that weighed two hundred and twenty pounds. The only variation was that more glass was put into the front of the helmet. The face, even though it is not a smiling one, must be seen in comedy.

How about the underwater sequence? Did you have any trouble with that?

Terrible problems with that. Well, we says,

"We'll try and build a camera box and shoot some place off the shores of Catalina." That's good clear water. It was necessary to have clear water into which we could lower our diving bell that contained the cameras.

But when we got over there we found out that at that time of year there was a milky substance in the water that you *couldn't* see very good in; the mating season of the fish around the island causes that. The moment you touch the bottom it rises up with the mud, rises up and blacks out your scene on you. Someone suggested, "Well, the next thing is we rent that big sulphur tank down at Riverside." This tank had been for many years an object of admiration and a place for tourists to swim, at twenty-five cents per person. We thought we'd use that. And of course the tank isn't deep enough for us. So we'll build it up another ten feet, because I've got to have the rear end of an ocean liner in it- the propeller and rudder. So they went down and built it up. We had to extend it both in height and in area, in order to get part of the keel of the boat and our rather elaborate underwater setting. It *must* be made to look like the bottom of the sea, because in the picture we drift ashore on a cannibal island in the Pacific and spring a leak in the stuffing box. Well, it can only be fixed from the outside. And she sends me down in a deep-sea diving outfit.

Well, we thought that would work out fine because we know the clear water we're goin' to get down there. We got ready to shoot.

But the base of the swimming pool is built to only hold seven or eight feet of water. Wouldn't take eighteen. We put the water in- and the bottom just went out from under it. The weight of the water forced the bottom out, crumbled it like it was a cracker.

We wrecked that pool. It's the Municipal Pool down there, for God's sakes. So we had to build them a new swimmin' pool.

Emergency budget item 'New swimming pool for Riverside, California.'

By this time, Lou Anger had the tic.

Then we moved up to Lake Tahoe, where the water was certainly clear and certainly cold. Lake Tahoe is the clearest water in the world, and it's always cold because it's up a mile high, and that's an awful big lake. I'm actually working in around twenty feet of water in that scene.

You imagine: we built this camera box for two cameras, a little bigger than this table square, with a big iron passage up to the top with a ladder on the inside. It holds two cameras and two cameramen. It was built of planks and sealed good so there was no leakage. But it's wood, and there has to be added weight. Well, I added about a thousand pounds of pig iron to it. Then it fogs up with the cameramen's breath. We find that the inside's got to be kept at the same temperature as the water outside. So we hang a thermometer out there so the cameraman looking through the glass can read it. And one on the inside. We find we have to put 200lb. of ice in there to keep it from getting steamed up. First thing in the morning, and the night before, we have to put ice in there, and then add more to make sure to keep the temperature of the camera box the same as the water on the outside, so it won't fog up the glass. Either one side or the other will fog on you, see. The difference was that when two bodies are in there, the body heat means we have to add more ice immediately. So as you put the cameramen in, you roll more ice in. Finally, arctic outfits- fur parkas and gloves- had to be requisitioned for the cameramen.

So there's the whole outfit, and me with that deep-sea diving suit down there- and the cameraman says,

"I'm too close. I want to be back further."

I moved that camera box. I moved it. That's how much you can lift when you're down around fifteen to twenty feet deep. The box must have weighed fourteen hundred pounds, something like that, with two cameras, two cameramen, about three hundred pounds of ice, another thousand pounds of weight- and I picked it up and moved it.

One of the worst problems in Tahoe was the water, so clear you could really see, but so cold that I could only stay down about thirty minutes at a time. That was as long as I could stay down. It'd go right through ya... because the water's so cold that it goes through to your kidneys. After about a half hour you begin to go numb. You wanted to get up and get out of there. So I was one *month* up there shooting that sequence.

By that time, I had the tic.

In one scene I was alone with the girl on the beached ship close to a cannibal-infested island. To save her and myself, I went underwater in a heroic effort to dislodge the ship. While working mightily, I used many gags the audience loved. I set up a sawhorse labeled 'men at work' in the sand at the bottom of the sea; I caught a swordfish, and, when another swordfish attacked me, I used the first fish to duel with him. Finding I'd forgotten my pliers, I picked up a lobster which bit a wire in two with one of its claws.

Did you ever cut a major gag clear out of a picture?

Oh yes. Because it didn't fit.

Did that happen in the Navigator?

It did. The gag that failed was my favorite, a beautiful gag. I thought it was going to be the best gag I had ever had, and it cost a lot of money.

After we figured it out, I had the property department construct 1,200 rubber fish all around ten inches long, and they had to be solid rubber so they wouldn't float, and hang 'em all with violin string, catgut, that the audience couldn't see. The property

room in our studio is filled with rubber fish [1926]. They were operated by a large piece of apparatus built by the Lewellyn Iron Company, which looked like a printing press capable of turning out an afternoon newspaper of large circulation. We used that big machine to revolve them in front of the camera, and sunk four telegraph poles under water up there to operate this apparatus overhead, to control the school of fish. But the gag photographed perfect. The rubber fish filmed beautifully and appeared very real. The effect we got was that of a large school of fish passing by in a steady stream.

So I'm down tryin' to fix the stuffing box of that ocean liner, and here's a school of fish goin' past from east to west, and there was a big jewfish tryin' to get through the school of fish, and he couldn't make it. Now, I thought that it would be extremely funny if this school of fish could be held up, while the fish that wanted to get from north to south could go through the traffic. So I reached down there and pulled a starfish off of a rock, and let it grab my breastplate and I stepped in the middle of the school of fish and brought 'em to a stop and then turned like a traffic cop and brought the big fish through. And when he went through, then I turned and brought the traffic on its way again. And the gag folded right up (went smoothly) like a million bucks. It was perfect. And it was a son-of-a-gun to do. It took us three days to get the gag.

In my opinion this was as good a sight gag as I ever had, and it still is my favorite.

We previewed the whole picture in one of the suburbs of Los Angeles, at Long Beach, but when this scene was exhibited not one giggle did it get, it brought not a titter. A minute or two later, still under water, I got my hands dirty and I stooped over and washed the muck off my hands in a bucket that had been left on the bottom of the sea. The audience howled. We didn't trust that preview. Says, "We'll keep it in for a second. Somethin's wrong." We kept it in for a second. And the same thing happened when we tried *The Navigator* out in theaters in Riverside and a couple of other nearby small towns. They would not laugh.

There was nothing for it but to cut out my favorite gag. It had taken days to do, for we were greatly handicapped as there could be no communication between me and the cameraman in the diving bell, except by signals with the hand, and these, of course, were extremely clumsy. This stunt had kept me under water in a cold lake many extra hours, and exclusive of time, had cost over ten thousand dollars. I threw the gag out. There was nothing else to do.

It took us a long time to figure out why that wonderful gag laid an egg. One of my gagmen, Clyde Bruckman, was so stunned he almost took the pledge.

It is always an interesting problem to me when an audience rejects any such sure-fire laugh-getter. I wondered whether it was because everybody in the audience was too busy wondering how the stunt was accomplished, too concerned in figuring out the mechanics of the gag, to be amused. Or it might be something else.

Now, to prove the gag, I put the gag in our 'coming attractions' runner. We used to call 'em runners. The theater would say: 'Coming Next Week.' And they'd just show you flashes of a picture that was goin' to come. I put that gag in the trailer, announcing *The Navigator* as a coming attraction, and it was an out-and-out belly laugh, the audience howled.

That gave me an answer that satisfied me. The other gags were accepted by the audiences who saw the whole picture, because they did not interfere with my job of saving the girl. I had gone down there to fix that stuffing box. The girl and I both are at the mercy of cannibals off of a cannibal island. I had no license in the world to go help a fish go through a school of fish. When I directed the submarine traffic I quit what I went down to do. I was interrupting the rescue to do something else that couldn't help

us out of the jam. People were worried about the situation, and also get mad at me for doin' it. Anything else could happen to me. That was all right. Like a lobster gettin' on my pants, and I used his claw for a clipper, for a pair of pliers. A swordfish tryin' to interfere with me. That was all right.

Some of my co-workers thought the gag flopped because it was too intricate. But I still believe it fell dead because it showed the hero interrupting the job of saving himself and the girl. No story.

From that day on, I realized that my feature comedies would succeed best when the audience took the plot seriously enough to root for me as I indomitably worked my way out of mounting perils.

Buster said they took that whole sequence out. He said the situation was too serious to put stuff like that in, they had to stay serious, working on the ship and getting it to move again and run again, and it was a serious situation that he was into, so, this stuff was all funny, and cute, but it didn't belong there, so they pulled the whole thing out, he got on with the business of fixing what he was fixing, and they used all that silly stuff in the trailer.

But I've never seen the trailer, yet I remember seeing that scene in the print I saw in England, it was one of the first things that impressed me.

Maybe in the European version they kept it.

The Navigator was my biggest money-maker. I consider The Navigator and The General the two best movies I ever made.

My, that was a nice picture to make. I buy a liner for \$25,000, that's my studio, and at the end of the picture I sell it again for \$25,000. I cut the film in my head as we go along. Of course, I take a certain amount of cover, but not much. We do it in five or six weeks. But another four weeks for the underwater sequence.**¹⁵⁷



¹⁵⁷ [** No agreement can be reached on whether The Buford was bought or rented, not that it matters much.]

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO.

...you can't laugh at a million dollars...

1924-5. Italian villa. Boys. Bridge.

1924.

So much has been written down through the years of that fabulous 1924 merger in which Loew's company, Metro, bought the Samuel Goldwyn lot in Culver City that I am astonished that one detail of the deal has never been described in the public prints: namely, how the greatest of all film studios acquired its name.

Marcus Loew's first decision was to call it Metro-Goldwyn. But Louis B. Mayer, then an independent producer, was eager to get into the big deal. In the dickering he had three aces to play, or so he thought. They were his exclusive contracts with two stars, Anita Stewart and Mildred Harris Chaplin, the estranged wife of Charlie, and with a youthful genius named Irving Thalberg. Mayer had recently hired Thalberg, then twenty-three, away from Universal where he had started his career as an office boy.

Mayer got a bad shock when it turned out that Loew wanted neither of his stars for the new company. What he wanted more than any star in pictures was the brilliant young Thalberg. By then Loew had become more convinced than ever that superior stories were the key to box-office success. And his friends at Universal had told him that Thalberg had a great story mind, could select screen material and work without discord with the most temperamental of writers.

During the dickering in New York between Mayer on one side and Loew and Nick Schenck on the other, it was agreed that Mayer was to be vice-president and general manager of the new concern, Thalberg second vice-president and supervisor of production.

When that was settled Louis B. Mayer said,

"Why don't you use my name as part of the firm's name?"

"Why should we?" asked Nick Schenck. "Marcus and I are not putting our names in the firm's title."

"But that would give me so much incentive to work hard out there." argued Mayer.

"And anyway three names sound more impressive than two. Listen!" As they did, he said,

"Metro-Goldwyn," paused, and after a moment, "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer!" Then he demanded, "Can't you hear what class the three names give it, what solidity and distinction? It's the same way with Hart Schaffner and Marx¹⁵⁸. Hart Schaffner sounds like nothing at all. Neither does Schaffner Marx. But Hart Schaffner and Marx! With that they had something. And look what a firm that has become just because they use three names instead of two."

And, sure enough, when the announcement of the merger came it included the news that the new studio would be known not as Metro-Goldwyn, but as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer!

In time, Louis B. Mayer became the highest paid executive in the world with over a million-dollar annual income. If it is true you can't laugh at a million dollars you can laugh even less at a million a year. But, besides his gifts as an executive, Mayer was also the industry's greatest salesman, and he proved it that day when he elbowed his

¹⁵⁸[A well known upmarket haberdashery in New York. K.H.]

name into 'Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer', which became the trade-mark for elegance in movies the world over.¹⁵⁹

Hedda Hopper: 'He behaved as if the earth had been invented exclusively for Louis B. Mayer. He gave and withheld his favors like Ivan the Terrible. If you crossed him, he sought vengeance. During the filming of the first version of Ben-Hur, its star, Francis X. Bushman, offended Mayer, who saw to it that the actor was kept off the screen for the next twenty-three years.'

Dardis says that the actual gross earnings on the first four Metro features was as follows:

The Three Ages	\$448,606
Our Hospitality	\$537,844
Sherlock, Jr.	\$448,337
The Navigator	\$680,406 ¹⁶⁰

Even when he has money he's not only supporting his own family but,

He's supporting a Talmadge clan as well. Not all of them but...

This is the thing that gets me, and Buster says Natalie was spending \$900 a week on clothes, and then there's paying back the loans to Joe Schenck for the houses, plus of course all this expensive entertaining, and every reference I can find, Buster is paying, yet he's in the same house with the Talmadges, two of whom are even bigger stars than he is financially speaking...

And have more money. Well, of course they didn't live there. They were in and out of there all the time but they didn't live there, because they were married and had their own homes, it's just they spent all their time together socially.

For which Buster paid.

If they were in his house, yes. They weren't necessarily always there.

You see, once you start adding up those things, it's impossible to believe that Dardis's figures can be correct because he couldn't have lived that high, and he wasn't, like Roscoe, living on credit, he was actually paying his bills as he went along. I find it difficult to unravel...

That's why I never believed those Dardis figures either. First of all, all of Buster's films that he made even in his own studio, they either made very little money, or none, according to Dardis. Well, if that occurred, Joe Schenck was a smart businessman, he wouldn't have continued making films for years. He would have gotten rid of Buster and closed the studio, if he was gonna not make money, or lose, and the way Dardis writes it, that's what was happening.

I feel that we have to very thoroughly discredit Dardis as a source, Uhuh.¹⁶¹

And even some of Blesh I have to describe as decidedly questionable...

Oh, Yuh.

Dardis: 'On the basis of the advance success of The Navigator, Schenck gave Buster a new contract in September 1924, It is a standard contract with only one departure, in paragraph seven, which contains a special clause: 'The artist specifically agrees that his

¹⁵⁹[Elegance? I'm afraid Buster is being awfully polite here. The fact is that MGM made movies that were expensive, lavish, flashy and essentially lacking in any worthwhile content.]

¹⁶⁰[If these gross earning figures are anywhere near correct, where would Buster get a \$90,000 bonus at 25% of profit? Something cockeyed somewhere... See page 439-40 for fuller discussion of issues.]

¹⁶¹[Please note. 'Uhuh' in some people's mouths is a negative. Where Buster or Eleanor say 'Uhuh.' [pronouncing both h's] They mean, the preceding comment or question is so true that further comment is superfluous, or, more succinctly, it means, Yes, absolutely.]

services are of a special, unique, extraordinary and intellectual nature and of great and special value to the producer...' Under the terms of this contract, Keaton was to be paid \$27,000 per completed film; it called for at least two films per year. If Buster did produce a third film, he was to be paid \$40,000 for it. The usual 25% profit sharing was in force, and his weekly salary was \$1,000. This was the first time he was paid this amount despite prior claims.' [Gospel according to Dardis.P.113. henceforth G.A.T.] 'The main shareholders in Buster Keaton Productions, Inc., a firm that remained a viable concern until 1940, included three members of the Schenck family: Joe, Nicholas, and the latter's wife, Pansy who owned a total of 39 and a third shares out of 100 among them. The two sons of Marcus Loew owned 14, while the composer Irving Berlin had 12. The only other shareholder of size was the North American Realty Corporation with 12 and two thirds. The remaining 22 shares were scattered among a group of family friends and executives of the firm, such as Lou Anger, the studio manager, and Leopold Friedman, the secretary. Although placed in formal dissolution in 1940, it was not until 1971 that the assets of the firm- the rights to Buster's films- were finally sold to Raymond Rohauer.' [Dardis.P.114.]

MY \$300,000 HOME AND SOME OTHER SEMI-TRIUMPHS.

Louise Brooks: 'Buster's whole life then was a movie.... His house was a set, the swimming pool was a set, the barbecue pit was a set. One impression I stick to- Buster was always 'on'. I can see how this would be a great trial to even such a vacuous lump as Natalie. He was always composing and visualizing, inventing scenes...'

There were the houses, for example. I had stupidly thought that wandering was over- that a house was where you lived. No. Wrong again. A house is where you move from- just a landing field. We had taken off from Westchester Place and made a landing at Westmoreland. After living in our modest Hollywood house a short while, now we were to take off again.

Well, to be honest about it, even to me, rent was money down the drain. Like many movie people I made considerable money during the early twenties in real-estate deals.

So we found a big tile-roof deal with lawns and clipped yews, for only fifty-five thousand dollars cash, on Ardmore Avenue. But we didn't have that kind of dough in the bank. No bonuses coming in for months, and the two grand each week just kept the cars, house, and parties running. But Joe Schenck stepped in- says, "Southern California real-estate is the thing. I'll loan you the full amount."

So I borrowed \$50,000 from Joe Schenck to buy a home of my own for \$55,000. The Ardmore house was wonderful. We were there for a year- well, ten months- refuelling. Then, before taking off for Muirfield Road, I resold it for \$85,000. Thirty thousand bucks clear profit. Not much I, or anyone else, could say to that. I used some of my profits to help Mom buy a large home for the family.

The Muirfield place was bigger, better, fancier- hell, why argue? We bought it and began housewarming. That meant- for me, anyway- two o'clock to bed and up at six, grab breakfast, and off to work.

Soon our wing tanks were full and engines revving up again at the end of the runway. Muirfield was only a ready-made job, somebody else's hand-me-down. Now the deal was: roll your own. I was still in no spot to win a point. Now there was one hundred five thousand dollars in the bank- pay back Joe Schenck and still have fifty grand. And then, a month early, here came the bonus check, ninety thousand dollars. So we were all square with my brother-in-law and still had one hundred forty thousand dollars. To cap it, Schenck then upped me to twenty-five hundred a week, take-home.



Looked like we'd be building. So Peg rented us a house she owned on Plymouth Street, and we sold the Muirfield shanty. For a big profit, natch. I began to figure- who wouldn't?- this is nice work if you can get it. And we had it. So I went out on my own and snagged a couple of nice vacant plots in Beverly Hills. Buy, take a long breath, and then sell. This thing could be as big as the Signal Hill oil field Roscoe and I didn't buy. I was hooked.

However, In 1924 the women were complaining about the Plymouth Street cabin. So I quietly designed a house- Gabe helped me draw it up down at the studio- a real little ranch house, and not that small. I was so sure of this that I wouldn't let my wife see it until it was ready to move into. I wanted to surprise her.

I built it, all on the q.t., a beautiful three-bedroom home for my own family, on the smaller of the Beverly Hills pieces, a nice hillside plot. It cost only \$33,000, but it was on a large lot, had a swimming pool, and was ideal for the four of us. It had to be all done, with every stick of furniture in place and ready down to the last light bulb, before I'd casually drive by with Natalie and stop. She'd say, 'What a dream of a house.' And I'd say, 'Nat, it's yours.' Final sequence. Fade.

When the great day came for her to look it over we brought along Mrs. Berenice Mannix, whose husband Eddie was then Joe Schenck's studio manager.

My wife took one look at the house and announced that it was too small. "In the first place," she said, "it has no room for the governess. Where would she sleep?"

Our Jim was then three years old, Bob- a year-old baby. Until then I had not been told they required a governess who would sleep in.

"Can't you see, Buster?" she said. "We will need one bedroom for ourselves, the boys another, the butler and cook another. So we better have a place with another bedroom for her."

Meanwhile Mrs. Mannix had been ohing and ahing very audibly about the new house. "Oh, what wouldn't I give for this house!" she kept exclaiming. "It's perfect."

I looked at my wife, then at her.

"If you really want it, Berenice," I said, "it's yours. Have Eddie look at it, and if he likes it I'll sell it to you."

Eddie liked it almost as much as his wife did. His only doubt about buying it was due to the possibility that Schenck might decide to return to New York and make his headquarters there. If that happened Mannix would have to go back with him. In view of this, I would buy the house back at that same price if he had to return East at any time. Not long afterward Eddie became one of the Big Three at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. He has outlasted everybody there but still lives in the home that was too small for my first wife.

I was risking nothing, of course, in making that offer. In the mid-twenties real estate was booming all over southern California, and the choicest lots and houses were right there in Beverly Hills.

Hedda Hopper describes Eddie Mannix as a 'feisty Irishman'.

Buster said that too. He had started out being a bouncer in the Schenck speakeasies or whatever they ran in those days.

Garson Kanin: 'When the Schenck brothers owned Palisades Amusement Park they were plagued by a gang of toughs who lived in the surrounding New Jersey area and would come into the park- swiping, stealing, or often simply disrupting the place for the hell of it. One of the ringleaders was a stocky little pug-nosed Irishman, named Eddie Mannix. The Schencks attempted to buy him off, without success. They tried to discipline him, but to no avail. When they threatened him, he made things hotter for them.'

They decided to hire him, and gave him a job at the Palisades Amusement Park, where he became a security officer, charged with keeping the peace. He went from this job to others, and, after a few years, became the manager of the whole enterprise. Later, the Schencks went into the film business. Still later, they went to Hollywood, and Mannix came along with them as one of their strong and able people.'

<1925.>

Builds Italian Villa in Beverly Hills.

The house I finally built in Beverly for the four of us was large enough to satisfy anyone.¹⁶² It was a two-storey mansion with five bedrooms for the servants and a three-room apartment over the garage for the gardener and his wife, who worked as our upstairs maid. This made six servants with a cook, butler, chauffeur, and governess. It stood on three and a half acres of beautiful lawn.

The land and house together cost me \$200,000, and we spent another \$100,000 furnishing it. I designed some of the furniture myself- the king-sized bed that my wife wanted for her room, the fancy bed I put in mine, and a wonderful pair of high bedroom bureaus of dark oak, with a full-length mirror set between them. I had these pieces built by the carpenters at the studio.

I still remember the thrill of pride that went through me the day Nick Schenck saw that house for the first time.

"I hope, Buster, you aren't going over your head on this place." I told him

"No." and I sincerely believed that. By that time I was getting \$2,000 a week, plus 25 per cent of my pictures' profits which brought me an additional \$100,000 a year.

The \$300,000 investment in that house seemed to me the safest I could make. The last thing that occurred to me, of course, was the possibility that my wife might one day take away that wonderful property from me. Which reminds me that after we moved into that house my wife's personal expenses for clothes and other knickknacks averaged \$900 a week.¹⁶³ I put no rein on her spending at any time.

I realize now that one thing wrong with our marriage was that my wife, a frustrated actress, could compete with the famous women stars we associated with, [her sisters] only by spending and entertaining and living as luxuriously as they did. This was quite a job, for it was an era of wild spending, and few of the silent women stars were frugal, and their earnings were enormous.

But it would be unfair and ridiculous for me to pretend that I myself was the frugal type. I bought myself everything I wanted, including the finest clothes, cars, hunting and fishing equipment. I spared no expense on our huge swimming pool or on the patio I had built behind the house. I spent \$14,000 moving to the rear of the house forty-two towering palm trees that had lined the drive in front.

Far as it was from Keaton's own modest dream, when showing guests round the Italian Villa Buster would say,

It took a lot of pratfalls, my friends, to build this dump.

I also enjoyed as much as my wife did throwing big parties. During the winter we had costume balls at the house. Excepting only the invitations to the fabulous shindigs given by Hearst and Marion Davies, invitations to our parties were the most eagerly sought in Hollywood.¹⁶⁴ Best of all I liked the barbecue parties we gave each Sunday

¹⁶²[This house is the main location of the lamentable 'Parlor, Bedroom and Bath', 1931, which is one of the few reasons said video is worth owning.]

¹⁶³[equals \$46,800 p.a.]

¹⁶⁴[Actually, as Hearst frowned on alcohol, probably more people had more fun at Buster's shindigs. Hearst's parties would have attracted more the influence and power seekers.]

from May to October except when we went out of town over the weekend. I'd draft Buster Collier and Ed Brophy to help me serve the eighty, or so, guests we had invited. Many others came uninvited. They had heard about our wonderful barbecued chickens, steaks, and English lamb chops.

Buster's entertaining always consisted of barbecues, from way back early twenties on through the rest of his life.

Wilson Mizner, the country's greatest wit, had a standing invitation. He boasted that he could smell my cooking even in Santa Barbara, ninety miles away. Among other guests who seldom failed to appear were most of the M-G-M big shots and directors and their wives; The Mayers, the Mannixes, and the Thalbergs, the Clarence Browns, Jack Conways, Bob Leonards, also Sam Goldwyn, Howard Hughes, Hearst, Marion Davies, Joe Schenck, and, of course, each and every in-law.

Tom Mix lived right next door to Buster at the Italian villa, and they had a hole through the hedge so they could pass back and forth to each others houses without having to go out and around in the street.

Anita Loos: 'The fifth and final of Mrs. Buster Keaton's silly homes was an 'Italian villa' in Beverly Hills. It was of the type that should have been approached through a long alley of formally clipped yews. But because acreage in Beverly Hills was at a premium, the villa occupied a rather narrow lot, which brought all it's hideous curlicues into bold relief.

I've never forgotten a certain afternoon when I happened to be inspecting Nate's rather scanty garden. I ran into Buster, who was digging a tiny ditch in which the water trickled aimlessly. Buster was as intent as if he were constructing the Panama Canal. When I asked what he was doing, he replied,

"Just having fun! I can make my little ditch go anywhere I choose.... to the right... or left or straight ahead." He paused to sigh in satisfaction.

"I sure have authority over my little creek!"

But that was the only authority Buster ever knew as a member of the Talmadge clan. Henpecked by a wife who considered any male an automatic enemy, poor Buster remained an uncomplaining husband as long as Natalie would have him. In Peg's mind, too, a husband was an enemy.'

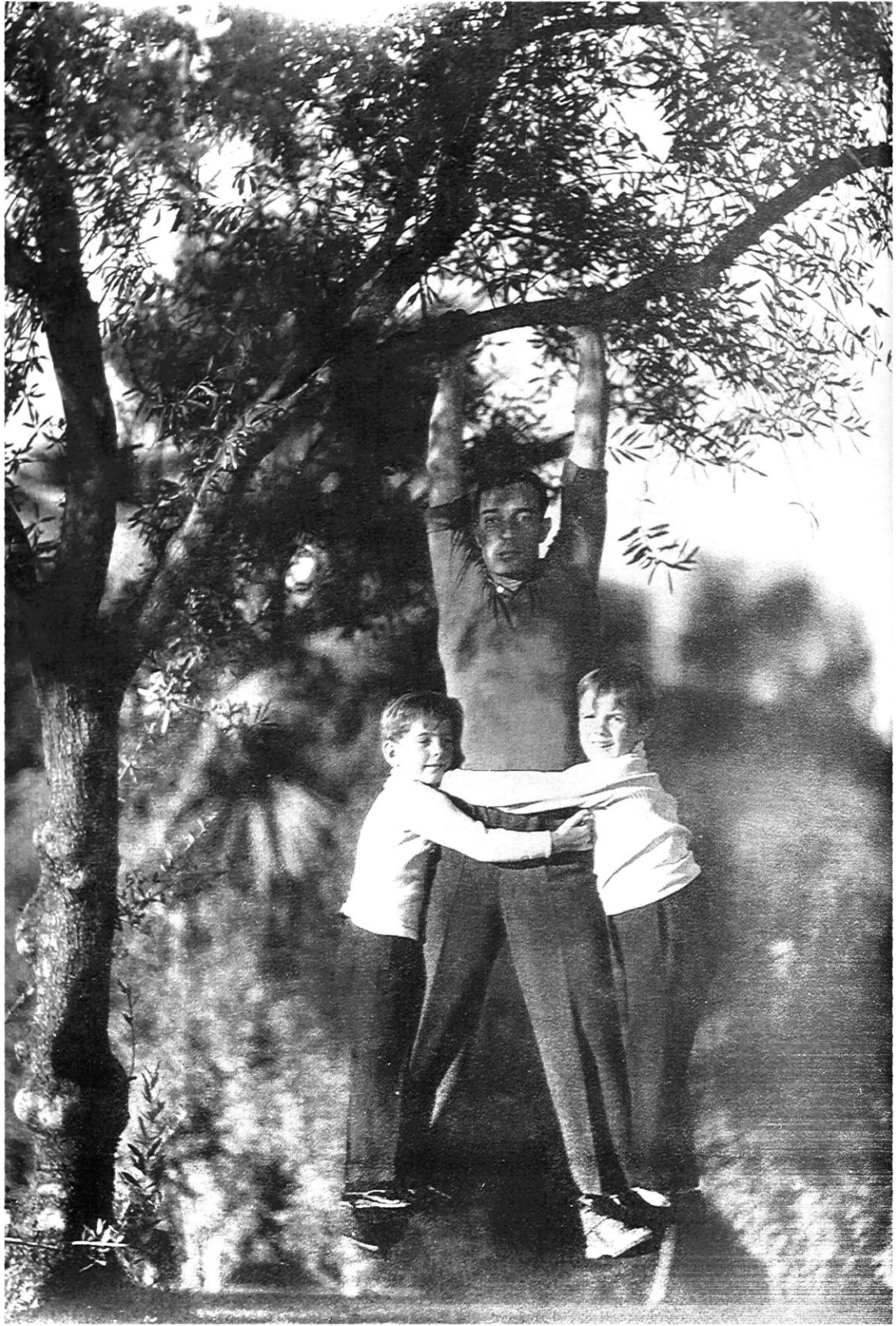
Me and my understudy, Buster II. Buster II could do anything- play and never get tired, be rich and handsome, never grow old. And write checks until the cows came home.

[Picture caption. This seems to be as close to bitterness as Buster ever got.]

MY BOYS.

When the boys were little I worried about the way they were being spoiled by my in-laws with the wholehearted assistance of my own mother and sister. Whatever my boys wanted they were given immediately. It was for their own sakes that I did not want Bob and Jim to be spoiled. Like everyone else I have noticed how difficult and disagreeable life can become for the spoiled child when he grows up.

Being Buster Keaton's kids the boys were wild Katzenjammer types whose imaginations did not incline them to constructive projects. On one occasion they became fed up with being told to wash their hands and face before each meal. They managed to turn off the house's water supply. All of it. Unable to get a drop of water from any faucet, upstairs or down, my wife called the Beverly Hills Water Department which dispatched some experts. The Department's men dug up 150 feet of lawn,



seeking a break in the main, before someone discovered that the whole trouble was due to the water being shut off under every sink in the house.

On another occasion the boys decided they didn't care for the food they were being served. Informed by the governess they must eat it anyway they waited until her back was turned. Then they dumped the food on their plates into the heating grate built into the floor. The heat had been turned on so their misdemeanour was quickly discovered when the food started burning in the grate.

A Rabelaisian side of those two kids was aroused the day a very social Beverly Hills woman called on my wife to ask her to work on some charity drive. The matron had her golden-haired little daughter with her. She was about four and romped off merrily to play with Bob and Jim. A half hour or so later my wife invited her visitor to have tea on the porch.

On walking out there they found the little girl doing a spring dance on the lawn, with my boys laughing their heads off and applauding. Jim and Bob had taken off all her clothes.

The lads developed another little trick I did not care for at all. Whenever a picture of mine was showing at a local theater my sons would storm inside without tickets. When the ticket taker or an usher tried to stop them they became abusive. "What have you to say about it?" they'd demand. "After all, it is our father's movie you're showing here. So why should we buy tickets?"

The governess meanwhile was at the box office, buying the tickets. Each time she warned them to wait for her, but they'd just run in anyway, stopping only to browbeat the man at the door.

My wife also was strong minded in certain ways. She had wanted a girl for her first child and put pink ribbons on the baby clothes. When the baby turned out to be a boy she refused to change them to blue,

"Pink is for girls." I told her. "Blue is for boys."

"No, pink is for boys." she insisted.

I didn't argue, figuring she preferred pink.

What did hurt me a little was when she insisted on naming our first boy Jimmy. I thought he should have been named Joseph like the four first sons of first sons who preceded him. But James was the name she preferred, and James he was christened. Do you think that Buster would have liked to have more children?

I don't know, he never said. He probably wouldn't have objected. I think in those days you just took what you could get, since birth control was very rare, if any.

BRIDGE.

Though bridge was always Hollywood's favorite indoor sport - well, with one exception - I had no interest in playing it until I went on a trip to New York and found myself on the same train as Nick Schenck and Mr. and Mrs. Abrams as a partner.

Like so many old pinochle players trying bridge for the first time I was reluctant to sacrifice my hand for the sake of my partner. Mr. Abrams kept telling me that I was stupid and became more abusive as the day wore on. Finally I said, "We better play some other kind of game, because if you bawl me out once more I'll slap the taste right out of your mouth."

With that I rushed out of their drawing-room. Nick Schenck followed me to the observation car and tried to calm me down. But I was past calming and refused to

have anything more to do with Abrams on that trip.

That man had me so sore that I spent hundreds of my spare hours during the next six months studying up on the game. I read everything about bridge I could find. Only then did I begin to play, starting with games at a quarter of a cent a point. As my game gradually improved I went to a one cent a point game, next jumped to ten cents a point and finally to games at twenty-five cents a point, which is big-league bridge and big-league money anywhere.

A little over two years after that train trip I was invited to Joe Schenck's New York apartment for dinner. Sam Goldwyn and Abrams also were there. After dinner Abrams said,

"I guess we'll not be able to have our usual game tonight. We haven't got a fourth, have we?"

"Oh, yes we have." said Schenck.

"Who?"

"Buster plays." said Joe.

When we cut for partners, Abrams and I drew each other as partners. Mr. Abrams shuddered and suggested a re-cut. Neither Schenck nor Goldwyn objected to this, for they had both played with me recently in games on the Coast. That night I drew Goldwyn as my partner in the re-cut.

I was in New York two weeks on that trip and played a lot of bridge at twenty-five cents a point, with Mr. Abrams in on many of the sessions. I made a point of asking for a re-cut each time I drew him as my partner. The day I started home I had the pleasure of accepting his check for \$3,400. This covered his losses to me during the two weeks. "Next time," he said as he forked over the check, "you will please take me as your partner."

"What for?" I replied. "It's more fun for me this way - and also more profitable."

Sam Goldwyn: "I'd hire the devil himself as a writer if he gave me a good story."

Smiling Sam Goldwyn was another movie bigwig who could get very testy at a bridge table. But then Goldwyn, the greatest of all independent Hollywood producers, has always had a mind that seems childlike at times.

One evening when he, his wife, and the Joe Schencks were dining at my house, Goldwyn announced,

"I have just brought the book of the year."

"You mean 'All Quiet on the Western Front'?" asked Schenck.

Goldwyn nodded, and Schenck told him,

"I was interested in bidding for it but after thinking it over decided I did not want to buy it. I felt it had a sort of gruesome story to tell and, worst of all, was the sad ending. The hero, after all, is a German, and his side loses the war."

"I got that all figured out," said Goldwyn with a happy grin. "I am going to have the Germans win the war."¹⁶⁵ We both looked at him in astonishment. Schenck said, "You are kidding, Sam."

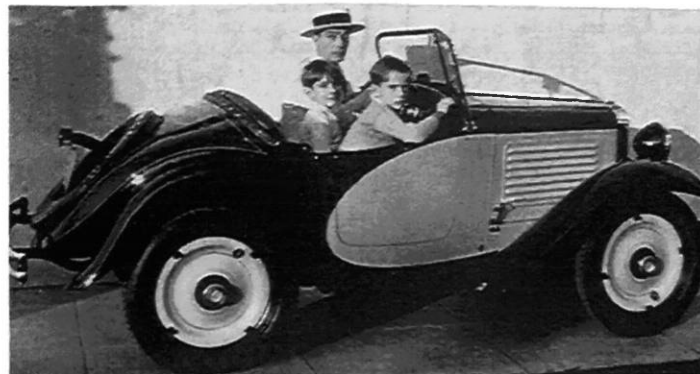
"No, I'm not," said Goldwyn.

"If you ever tried to change the ending of the World War," Schenck said earnestly, "you'd make yourself the laughingstock of the world."

The following week when the three of us were again together, Goldwyn announced, "I sold 'All Quiet on the Western Front' to Universal for \$10,000 more than I paid it, and was I glad to get rid of it!"

The footnote to the story was that the picture, in which the Germans did not win the war, grossed a whopping \$8,000,000 and saved Universal Pictures from bankruptcy. [In 1930.]

Buster was an avid bridge player, he loved to play bridge. He would play morning, noon and night if he had chance, when he wasn't doing anything else, of course. When he was working or writing of course he didn't, but when he had nothing else to do you'd find him playing cards. He did a lot of big stakes gambling but not with his own money. Mostly when he did it was after he didn't have a lot of money, and the producers and directors who knew he was a brilliant bridge player would back him up to 25 cents a point, you could change twenty-five hundred, three thousand dollars an evening playing for those stakes, but of course he couldn't afford to do that, so he would play for maybe two or three cents, and they would make up the difference. If he won, they split it, and if he lost, they paid it. I never knew anything about Buster having bridge gambits published, but he was an extremely fine player. He ranked up with all the pro players that write columns and books these days.



¹⁶⁵[If you think this sounds ridiculous, what about 'Tess of the D'urbervilles' with a happy ending. They did that. Indeed almost any adult fiction with even vaguely realistic stories has been changed by such as Goldwyn to suit the Cinderella mentality that Hollywood has always assumed, probably correctly, that a wish-fulfilment starved public wishes to see. Dorothy Parker is reputed to have said, in response to a story conference where the top brass were insisting on a happy ending for an adult story: "Two million years of human history, and there's never been a happy ending yet." The brass didn't get the point.]



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.

"Now what the hell caused that?"

1925-6. Seven Chances. Go West. Battling Butler.

MARCH. SEVEN CHANCES.

Molly Haskell. 'One of the bitterest and funniest comedies on sexual relations ever made is Keaton's uxorious Seven Chances.¹⁶⁶In the first half, the hero endures the supreme social torture of having a marriage proposal whispered from one to another in a roomful of women, and then, when everyone has gotten the word, he is mocked in a chorus of laughter. The same kind of nightmare proliferation turns the second half from funhouse ingenuity into horror, with the beleaguered hero racing down Main Street pursued by a tribe of termagants, a thousand prospective dowager-brides who have responded to an ad for a wife he has placed in the paper. In that one masterstroke of a visual gag, Keaton runs the gamut of male fears- fears of female supremacy, of entrapment by marriage, and of a woman as 'wife', of the little man pitted against the big woman and dwarfed by her overriding competence, and most of all, of castration.'

Seven Chances was not a good story for me. A certain local screwball sold himself to Joe Schenck as a great director, and also sold him a story he'd bought- a Belasco show called Seven Chances. Joe just went to the preview, and he buys this thing for twenty-five thousand dollars without us knowing it. The money wasn't much, but the show! I had seen it in New York- 1916 for heaven's sakes- and it was a flop then. Closed in a week, if I recall.

As a rule Schenck never knew when I was shootin' or what I was shootin'. He just went to the preview. But somebody sold him this show and he buys this thing for me; and it's no good for me at all...

So this nouveau big shot casts the picture, hires extra writers, and orders sets. In a week or so, the bills start coming in. Lou Anger blew his top- "This guy goes- now!"

"How about Joe Schenck?" I said.

"Joe Schenck, Joe Schmenck!" Lou hollered, and that was that.

Except we still had the story. The type of unbelievable farce I don't like. We made it anyway and got a fair picture.

On Seven Chances, I had to use surveyor's instruments again. I had an automobile, a Stutz Bearcat roadster and I'm in front of a country club. There's a lot of people walking up and down the side-walks. Now it's a full-figure shot of that automobile and me. I come down into the car, release the emergency brake after starting it, and sit back to drive- and I don't move. The *scene* dissolves and I'm in front of a little cottage in the country. I reach forward, pull on the emergency brake, shut the motor off, and go into the cottage. Later, I come out of the cottage, get into the automobile, and the scene changes back to the club. I and the automobile never moved.

Now the automobile has got to be the same distance, the same height and everything to make the scene work. For that baby we used surveying instruments, so that the front part of the car would be the same distance from the camera- the whole shooting match.

Can you cite me an example of something that started out as an accident and ended up by working well for you?

I had one that was actually a godsend, in Seven Chances.

A friend has advertised in the paper that I'll marry anybody so long as I can be married by five o'clock. Didn't say what age or anything. Just said 'Bride wanted at the

¹⁶⁶['Uxorious, Excessively attached to, or dependant on one's wife.']

church by five o'clock', or something like that- It has to do with inheriting an estate or whatever.

So all the women in the world show up to get married, with home-made bridal outfits on; lace curtains, gingham table cloths for veils. And my brides-to-be chase me out of the church- my God, we actually hired five hundred women, every shape and every size, and this chase was on.

But when it came down to the finish!

Well, hell, I can outrun 'em.

Even if they catch me, how can you end the picture?

Can I marry all of 'em? Not even in Utah.

Can I fight 'em?

So we're crippled. Can't get in any good chase gags, can't end it with any kind of climax. So we simply decided to fade out on the chase. Our fade-out was on me, running down the side of a hill with all those weirdos after me.

I had a real dud picture - and we knew it too - and there was nothing we could seem to do about it. However, we previewed it. Medium laughs, a few giggles through all that chase. Then suddenly, in the second preview, just before the fade, the audience sat up in their seats and they were ready. Expected more.

They expected somethin'- for the first time in the picture- I whispered to Bruckman, "Now what the hell caused that?" He didn't know, so we ran the ending slow at the studio. Well, this was only the one scene of that in the picture.

And do you know, three little rocks saved me! It was a short sequence where I was running away from a batch of women, and I led them off into open country. All I had set up for the scene was the camera panning with me as I came over the skyline and was chased down into the valley. As I was coming down that hill, sliding down, on my feet most of the time, there was some boulder rocks on the side of the hill, and I hit one accidentally, I jarred this one rock loose and it started to roll after me, bouncing down the hill with me. On its way it actually hit two other rocks. And I looked behind me in the scene and there it was; three little rocks about the size of bowling balls chasing me. So here come three boulders, and I actually had to scam to get out of the way.

That's all there was: just three rocks. I says,
"Oh, oh, that's all we need."

That gag gave me the whole final chase, and it was an accident in the first place. Havez piped up,
"Like I alluz said, rocks is funnier than women."

So we milked that gag. We went back and I think for a finish we built fifteen hundred different shape rocks, starting from grapefruit-size up to one was eight foot in diameter, Gabourie laid it out. He built those rocks out of paper-mache on chicken wire.

Then we went out to the Ridge Route, which is in the High Sierras, and we found a longer ridge, one of those big barren mountainsides, steeper than a forty-five degree angle. With a couple of truckloads of men, we spotted that mountain with those rocks, and then I went up there to the top and got started. We assembled the gals again, a hundred feet back, and used a starter's gun.

On your marks, get set, bang!

Gabe triggered them in sequence and I came down with the rocks. I only had to kick the first little one and then keep going. And the key words are 'keep going' because it built up to an avalanche right on my heels. At least I was working with paper mache,

although by the time you built the framework the big one weighed something like four hundred pounds- and you could get hit with them all right.

So naturally I stumble- if it's not in the script, I stumble anyway- and the big one knocked me twenty feet in the air. Lessley never stopped cranking. When I staggered up and staggered on, it was for real.

Well, I got in the middle of that rock chase and completed a sequence. It's the only thing that saved the picture for me. And that was an accident. It was just an out-and-out accident.

When I've got a gag that spreads out, I hate to jump a camera into close-ups. So I do everything in the world I can to hold it in that long-shot and keep the action rolling. When I do use cuts I still won't go right into a close-up: I'll just go in maybe to a full figure, but that's about as close as I'll come. Close-ups are too jarring on the screen, and this type of cut can stop an audience from laughing.

If I were going to show you this hotel lobby where we are now, for instance, I'd go back and show you the whole lobby on that first shot, and then move in closer. But the main thing is that I want you to be familiar with the atmosphere, so that you know what my location is and where I am. From then on I never have to go back to the long shot again unless I get into action where I am going to cover space in a hurry.¹⁶⁷

Seven Chances grossed \$598,288. (G.A.T. Dardis.)

NOVEMBER. GO WEST.

(Ref. "...freezing whisper of melancholia...")

I used to daydream an awful lot in pictures; I could get carried away and visualize all the fairylands in the world. Dream sequences.... Perhaps that's why Agee says that. I guess it was just my natural way of workin'..."1958.

I don't see Buster's work as pessimistic *at all*. Very optimistic.

Comedy is a serious business.

The Keaton heroine 'was no juicy part, yet she had to have looks, intelligence, fortitude, paid-up insurance, and a grasp of the art as Keaton underplayed it. So far, in five years and two dozen films, Buster had not found her yet.

They were discussing the problem at a rainy-day conference. Suddenly Buster said,

"I think I'll hire a cow."

His tone brought everyone to attention.

"A Jersey cow," he said. "A cow called Brown Eyes." [name of D.W.Griffith heroine]

He was serious.

Havez... "Cows are scarcer than actresses around Hollywood, but we can find one. However, I deeply misdoubt you can train a cow even as good as an actress. They give the milk, kick the pail over, and they're through. The cows, I mean."

"Get the cow, I'll train her."

Brown Eyes was found.

"Within ten days, I'll have her following me everywhere. Now just leave us alone."

¹⁶⁷[Most movie viewers will be more familiar with the opposite method, where everything is shot in medium and close shots, and the viewer has no idea where they are located in space.]



Old Mother nature made a shambles of my shooting schedule when I made Go West! In this I played a tenderfoot whose life is saved by a cow.

The cow we bought for this great honor was a Holstein. She was a beautiful creature, and I named her 'Brown Eyes'. But as she did not appear to be any more intelligent than other Holsteins I took great pains in training her for her new work.

I began my training of Brown Eyes by leading her around the studio on a rope. I continually fed her carrots and other culinary delights for bovines. When she became convinced that following me paid off big, I substituted a string for rope and finally a thread for the string.

I never had a more affectionate pet or a more obedient one. After a while I was able to walk her through doors, in and out of sets, even past bright lights. The only difficulty we had was when I sat down and she tried to climb into my lap. I didn't take her on location until I had her perfectly trained to obey my orders.

Everything went fine until we got Brown Eyes out there on the steaming hot desert. Weather is only one of the hazards of working outdoors. Anything at all can happen from the moment you take your camera out of the studio. When you worked outdoors with a cow as your leading lady you were really asking for trouble. But I always preferred working on location because more good gags suggested themselves in new and unfamiliar surroundings.

Charlie Chaplin: 'I loathe working outside on location because of its distraction. One's concentration and inspiration blow away with the wind.'

We shot Go West about 60 miles out of Kingman, Arizona. It was summer, and the location was on the desert, a place so hot at midday that you have to pack ice around your camera to prevent the emulsion on the film from melting.

There I couldn't do a thing with her, not one thing. We were mystified until a rancher told us,

"That cow's in heat. She won't be a bit of use to you until she's over that."

"How long does that take?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, "about ten days or so."

We had thirty people in the unit on location. We were really out in open country; four cameramen (that's including the assistants), electrician- generally takes about three men with him (because we took a generator, which takes a couple of men), technical man- takes a couple of dozen carpenters, a prop man must take about four extra helpers with him. Then we house 'em up there, see- we take tents and everything else and a portable kitchen.

The idea of how daily expenses would mount while we waited for that cow to get her mind off sex was dismaying.

We had selected Brown Eyes because of her unusual beauty and striking markings. She had been in too many scenes already to start looking for another Holstein to double for her. I did the only sensible thing. I ordered her let out of the corral so she could find an affectionate and empathy-loaded bull for herself. She picked a bull, but he was not affectionate. In fact he snubbed her by walking away.

The cattle on that ranch were Baldfaced beef cattle, and had not been dehorned like our dear little Brown Eyes. However, I never suspected bulls were so clannish and choosy.

We turned our lovelorn bossy out again¹⁶⁸. This time, not only did she fail to attract the Baldfaced bulls, but she aroused the jealous wrath of the Baldfaced cows who started to charge her. They would have gored Brown Eyes, too, except for the interference of some ranch cowboys who rode up just in time to save her.

There was nothing to do after that but wait for our cow to get out of heat. We spent our time taking shots of the lovely country all around us but later never figured out how to use that film. When Brown Eyes finally was ready to turn her attention to movie-making again we did fine with her.

Joe Schenck heard about our wait and said the sort of things bosses usually say after budget-busting incidents. In this case:

"That's Keaton for you! If there's a costly way to make a movie he'll find it."

J.G. You are rarely deliberately pathetic. In 'Go West', however, there is a slight element of conscious pathos. Did you feel you needed something more emotional there than in other films?

I was going to do everything I possibly could to keep that cow from being sent to the slaughter-house: I only had that one thing in mind. And I ran into one disappointment on that film. One of the most famous Western shows ever seen in the United States was called 'The Heart of Maryland', in which these two guys are playing cards, and one guy calls the other a name, and he takes out his six-shooter and lays it down on the table, pointing right at this fellow's middle, and says, 'When you call me that, smile...'

Go West was a burlesque Western film, and I, as a very verdant, green tenderfoot, got myself into a poker game with a villain in the bunk house. He cheats, and I tell him so in a subtitle. He pulls a gun on me and in another subtitle replies by quoting, inaccurately, from Owen Wister's 'The Virginian'¹⁶⁹:

"In this country, when you say that- smile!" Now, I never smile on the screen and never have. What was my character to do in this situation? In the studio we thought this very much okay and highly comic- one of those happy accidents that turn up now and then to relieve the routine course of a carefully planned scenario. We had figured that the audience would know that I could not smile, and that they knew that my frozen face was as necessary to the character I always play as my flat hat and my necktie on a rubber, which pulls down and snaps back. Well, because I'm known as frozen face, blank pan, we thought that if you did that to me an audience would say, 'Oh my God, he can't smile: he's gone; he's dead.' But it didn't strike an audience as funny at all: they just felt sorry for me.

We didn't find that out until the preview, and it put a hole in my scene right there and then. Of course I got out of it the best way I could, but we run into these lulls every now and then. But when the picture was projected in the theaters, no one laughed. I do not believe that this was because they were worried that I might get shot. Our mistake probably was that we had counted on something that was outside the picture at the particular moment. Perhaps they laughed when they got home, but in any event, the scene was a dud. Nor was there laughter when, with my fingers, I pointed up the corners of my mouth, making a sort of jack-o'-lantern grin.¹⁷⁰

This is as near a smile as I have ever been on the screen, and nobody laughed.

¹⁶⁸[Bossy, a common name given to a cow, like 'Rover' for a dog. K.H.]

¹⁶⁹[The quote is originally from 'The Virginian', but I don't know whether it also appears in 'The Heart of Maryland'.]

¹⁷⁰[In 1919 'Broken Blossoms' by D.W.Griffith contained a very famous and horrific scene where a grin is made with the fingers by Lillian Gish. She is then beaten to death by her father [played by Donald Crisp]. Thus this one scene contains two separate burlesques.]

I had one bad disappointment in that thing. I thought I had a funny sequence when I had my cattle- I turned 'em loose- and I actually turned 'em loose here in Los Angeles in the Santa Fe depot in the freight yards, and brought 'em up Seventh Street up to Spring Street. And we put cowboys off on every side street to stop people in automobiles from comin' into it. And then put our own cars with people in there. And I brought 300 head of steers up that street. I'd hate to ask permission to do that today. But then I thought that by goin' in a costume store, and I saw a devil's suit- well, bulls and steers don't like red, they'll chase it. 'Course I was tryin' to lead 'em towards the slaughter house. I put the suit on and I thought I'd get a funny chase sequence, and have the cows get a little too close to me, and get scared. Then really put on speed tryin' to get away from 'em. But I couldn't do it with steers- steers wouldn't chase me. I actually ran and had cowboys pushin' 'em as fast as they could go, and I fell down in front of 'em and let 'em get within about ten feet of me before I got to my feet. But as I moved, they stopped too. They piled up on each other. They didn't mind a stampede at all. But they wouldn't come near me. We didn't dare speed them up, or we would have had a real stampede. Well, that kind of hurt when you think that's going to be your big finish chase sequence. We had to trick it from all angles.... Some parts I liked, but as a picture, in general, I didn't care for it.

['One day Buster showed up at the Educational studios, where Roscoe was directing two-reelers, and spoke quietly to Roscoe. Babe Landon, who was making a film for Roscoe, recalled what happened next:

Babe Landon: "Buster turned to me and said,

"Come over to the studio tonight and wear your rompers, Babe, we're going to have a few laughs."

(I used to wear rompers a lot in those days, playing small children.) That evening, Roscoe and I went over to Buster's studio. I didn't know what it was all about or what was going to happen. We sat around for a while in Buster's dressing room- kitchen, dining room, dressing room. A man could live there; Buster frequently did. I remember Roscoe and I were sitting in the corner at a big table. After a while Roscoe got up and tried to get past me, tried to squeeze between me and the table. Now, as you can see, I'm a big woman. I was known at one time as the female Fatty Arbuckle. [presumably before the trial] Roscoe tried to get past me and got stuck. He sat down on my lap facing me. He looked at me, looked around at Buster and his crew, who were roaring with laughter, then he looked back at me and said, "Hey, Babe, you know, I believe we could do it. It wouldn't be much of a thrill, but it would be a hell of a laugh." [Roscoe exits.] After a while he returned, dressed as a woman. God, he made a better woman than I do. Then he and Buster told me what it was all about. Roscoe was going to play my mother, and we were going to shoot a scene for Go West. We went out on to the set, a big department store. Roscoe did the most incredible falls. He'd dive over the counter and come up smiling. To Buster and him the whole thing was a laugh. We're right there in the film. It was their way of thumbing their noses at the people who had decreed that Roscoe could not appear on the screen."

['Daniel Moews, in 'Keaton. The Silent Features Close Up.' mildly deplores the use of certain 'stock comic figures' and 'ethnic stereotypes'... '(for good measure, in an interior scene there is also a grotesquely fat fat girl, another comic staple of the period.)'

Mr. Moews also wisely points out that apart from one shot in Steamboat Bill, Jr, this is the last feature boasting the appearance of Buster's porkpie hat.]

Friendless falls in love with Brown Eyes. Ranch owners daughter falls in love with Friendless.

Now there, was a triangle.

Grossed just under \$600,000. [G.A.T. Dardis.]

Gloria Swanson: 'In spite of setbacks and intramural squabbles, the company had grown, and with the appointment in 1925 of Joseph Schenck as president and chairman of the board, UA acquired a tough, aggressive executive who was out to make millions and who knew the business of financing and distributing movies inside out. In my talks with Maurie Cleary a year before, I had naively imagined that being one of the select 'united artists' would mean board meetings over coffee on the terrace of Pickfair and help in a jiffy if I should ever need it. I soon learned that what it really meant was trying to hold my own in long, gruelling business sessions in New York with Joe Schenck and a shrewd gang of lawyers, accountants and bankers.'

<1926.>

Today [before June, 1926] The comedy occupies a more dignified place in the amusement business than in the early days. It used to be a sort of after piece to a longer picture. Now it is often the whole bill. With this increased importance has come a different type of comedy; space is now needed to work out logically and adequately a good idea or story. Formerly I did two-reelers, one right after another, and now it is an effort to get through two five-reel pictures in a year. This has not come from any slowing up. We work just as hard around the studio as we ever did, and we play our games of baseball no more frequently, but the old pace cannot be maintained. We have educated audiences, and they have gone beyond and demand more of us. We can no longer use the old, impossible gags that were inserted without rhyme or reason; anything served that was funny to fill in the time until the grand finale, and that was inevitably an elaborate chase, usually through the streets. I do not mean to say that the day of the impossible gag is over or to imply that these things were not funny. They were often screamingly so.

If I ever appear on the stage again, even if it is only for a benefit, I shall have no lines.¹⁷¹ But I am reluctant now to appear before a crowd of people, and nothing would induce me to make a speech. I am not sure that I approve anyway of personal appearances for moving-picture stars. It requires a type of showmanship which few of us have, and it is not our business to talk.

Once I was lured into attending the opening of a new theater in Philadelphia. It had been broadcast through the papers that a trainload of people, prominent in the theater and picture world, was to arrive at the Broad Street Station to attend the opening of this very superior picture and vaudeville house. There was much smiling and bowing and many handshakes. I walked through the crowd in absolute seriousness until I heard someone say:

"Stick a pin in him, and see if you can make him laugh." It was with no little apprehension and with a great deal of effort that I reached a cab outside the station. That night- how reminiscent those two words seem- I made a speech. Dumb show is best for screen people, if they must appear in public, especially for the comedian.

March 1926. Doris Deane and Roscoe were invited to the Keaton's for dinner. After the meal, Roscoe, who had just bought a new Lincoln, said,

"Let's take a little ride." Doris and Natalie sat in the back while the men climbed in front.

Doris Deane: "We began to chat on the drive, Natalie and I.

¹⁷¹[Here is one 1926 prophecy that was not fated to prove accurate. It's more a statement of intent really.]

The boys up front seemed to be immersed in something. Well, time went by, and suddenly I said to Pops [Roscoe], "We seem to have been driving a long time. Where are we?" Buster turned to me and with that exquisite deadpan face of his just said one word:

"Yosemite."

They had driven us over four hundred miles.

Now, Yosemite Park was not open to the public at this time. They were still building the highway through, using convict labor from San Quentin. The boys had decided to take a little surprise vacation. There we were, in the middle of nowhere, in fur coats and evening dresses. By now it's morning. We stopped at a drugstore near Yosemite and picked up a few things. The boys told us that they intended to spend a few days in the park. Well, now, no women were allowed in the area because of the convict labor, but of course the prison road camp sergeant in charge of the road works recognizes Buster and Roscoe. He just told us to duck down in the back seat so that the convicts didn't get too excited at seeing real live women, and we drove through. The lodge was open, just. We had a marvellous time. Real back-to-nature stuff.

Then the word comes through that we have been forbidden to leave. Word had got out that there were two women in Yosemite, in a prohibited area. The State Highway Commission said that all roads were closed to us until they had had a full investigation. The boys discussed the situation. Roscoe had to get back to Hollywood to begin direction on a new movie, and Buster was due to start work too. They didn't really have time to wait for the open season. So they rang up the railroad. There was a track running through the reserve. They hired a whole train, a Pullman car for us, and a flat wagon to put the car on. Then train pulls into Yosemite, then pulls out again with all of us and the Lincoln on board."

Buster Collier: "Gals used to go for Buster. Clean-cut. Quick. Athletic. That great smile- worth a million dollars because they never saw it on the screen- his nice language, his thoughtfulness, his wonderful dancing. Yes, the gals took a second look at Buster Keaton.

That came along a little later in his marriage. I don't think that Buster was fundamentally- Let me say, I think Buster was reassured by it. I can tell you this: he was susceptible to flattery. No, not flattery, but he sure needed affection. Affection kept him going. I'm sure of it. Kept him from building a wall around himself. At least then."

SEPTEMBER. BATTLING BUTLER. MGM.

Battling Butler I liked. It was a good picture. I told the original story that was taken from the stage show except that I had to add my own finish. I couldn't have done the finish that was in the show... he just finds out in the dressing room up at the Madison Square Garden that he don't have to fight the champion and he promises the girl he'll never fight again. And of course, the girl don't know but what he did fight.

But we knew better than to do that to a motion picture audience. We couldn't promise 'em for seven reels that I was goin' to fight in the ring and then not fight. We knew we had to fight. So we staged a fight in the dressing room with the guy who just won the title in the ring- by having bad blood between the fighter and myself. And it worked out swell.

Clyde Bruckman: "My God, it was a really dramatic fight, not a comedy-fight. Yet it stood up in a comic picture- one of the best

closings of any Keaton film. You're all in there rooting for this little guy against the world's champion."

'The line between the 'nap' which is pulled (which doesn't hurt) and the 'straight nap' (which does), is a very fine one, and the road to the audience's heart is littered with broken limbs and damaged organs...

Buster Keaton donned the [boxing] gloves for Battling Butler, which is remarkable for the ferocity of the punches: straight nap here, no pulling.' [Slapstick. The illustrated history of knockabout comedy. Tony Staveacre.]

Luis Bunuel. Review of: Battling Butler. Written and directed by Buster Keaton. (Cahiers d'Art, No. 10, 1927.)

A wonderful film. Aseptic. Disinfectant. The blinders of tradition are cast off, and our eyes grow bright again as we watch Buster's young-hearted balanced world. Here is a great specialist in treating the disease called sentiment. His film is great; it's like a good bathroom; it has the vitality of an Hispano. Buster will never try to make us tearful; he knows that the too-quick tear is finished and done with. On the other hand, he is no clown trying to make us roll in the aisles. Yet we do not stop smiling for a moment- we smile not at him but at ourselves, and it is a smile of health and Olympian strength.

In the area of the cinema, I will put the characteristically melancholy expressiveness of a Keaton above the endlessly nuanced expressions of Jannings. Film makers misuse Jannings; they multiply the slightest contraction of his facial muscles to the n'th degree... Buster Keaton's expression is as simple as a bottle's, although we can always detect his aseptic spirit dancing around the clear circle of that unblinking eye. A bottle and the face of Buster Keaton can express infinite points of view.

Few of us are able, as he is, to achieve while we work that rhythmic and architectonic meshing which is film. Editing is the key; editing combines, comments on, and unifies all the elements. Can one possibly achieve more cinematographically? Yet some people think Keaton- the antivirtuoso- inferior to Chaplin. The rest of us consider it vastly to his credit that Keaton achieves his purpose by working directly with all the means of comic expression. Keaton is full of a humanity quite beyond a recent, uncreated brand of what one might call fashionable humanity.

There is much talk about technique in films like Metropolis, Napoleon, etc. No-one ever mentions the technique of films like Battling Butler, and that is because here technique is so indissolubly fused with all the other elements that people are not even aware of it. In much the same way, we live in a house without ever thinking of the potential durability of it's materials. The superfilms should serve as lessons for technicians; the films of Keaton can enlighten reality itself, with or without the realistic technique.

The Jannings school: European; sentimental; biased in favour of art and literature; traditional.

The Keaton School: American; vital; photogenic; lacking culture and tradition. [Presumably translated from Spanish.]

Both Schenck and MGM were convinced that Battling Butler would be a hit, and they promoted it heavily months before it was released. Within a year of its release it had earned three-quarters of a million dollars.¹⁷²

In 1926 Joe Schenck became one of the chief executives of United Artists.

As part of the deal, he brought to that company the releasing rights of the pictures

¹⁷²[And it is also one of Buster's finest features, but unfortunately he never seems to have been asked much about it.]

made by Norma Talmadge, Constance Talmadge, and myself. We continued to produce our own pictures independently, however. But I made only three for United Artists: *The General*, *College*, and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*¹⁷³



¹⁷³[None of which were promoted half as well, apparently.]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR.

The General was my pet. It was a page out of history.

1926. The General.

FEBRUARY. 'THE GENERAL'. UNITED ARTISTS. 1926.

Clyde Bruckman run into this book called 'The Great Locomotive Chase', (by William Pittenger, 1868,) a situation that happened in the Civil War, and it was a pip.

A few days after Battling Butler was finished, Clyde dropped by my house.

He said

"I've got a story for you." and gave me the book,

"I'll read it."

After reading the book overnight, I raced to the studio.

"It's a picture!" I said to Clyde, "And I want you to help me direct it."

I threw out mere gags as fast as they were thought up.

"The whole picture is a chase, that's enough. Now, no short-cuts. It's got to be so authentic it hurts." Says,

"Well, it's awful heavy for us to attempt, because when we got that much plot and story to tell, it means we're goin' to have a lot of film with no laughs in it. But we won't worry too much about it if we can get the plot all told in that first reel, and our characters- believable characters- all planted, and then go ahead and let it roll. And every other situation is more dramatic than it is funny." Well, that was the finished picture, and- it held an audience. They were interested in it- from start to finish- and there was enough laughter to satisfy.

I was more proud of The General, I guess, than any other picture I ever made; because I took an actual happening out of the Civil War, and I told it in detail too. I took that page of history and I staged it exactly the way it happened.

I told the story of the Union agents, the Northerners. They intended to enter the South as civilians from the State of Kentucky, (which was neutral territory,) pretending that they were coming down to fight for the Southern cause. That was an excuse to get on that train, which takes them up to an army camp.

Their leader took seven men with him, including two locomotive engineers and a telegraph operator; and he told them that if anything went wrong they were to scatter individually, stick to their stories that they were Kentuckians (down to enlist in the Southern army,) and then watch for the first opportunity to desert and get back over the line to the North.

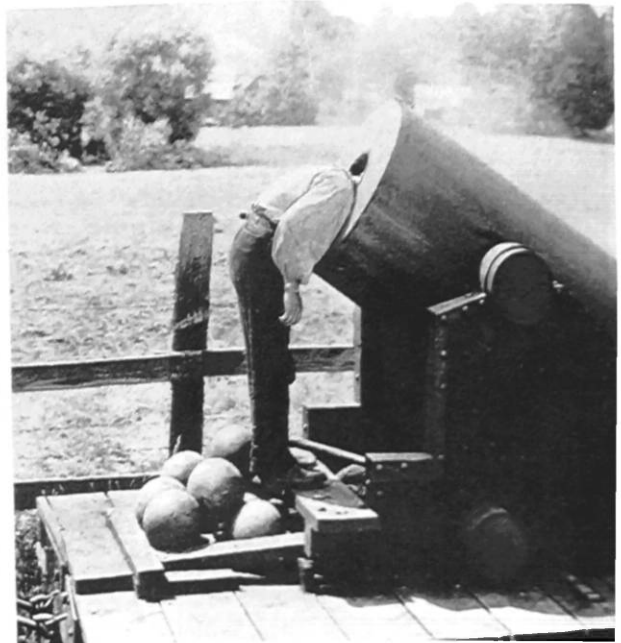
As soon as they stole that engine they wanted to pull out of there, intending to disconnect the telegraph and burn bridges, and destroy enough track behind them to cripple the supply route of the Confederate trains moving north to supply the Southern armies.

That was what they intended to do.

And then the chase was on. And I staged the chase exactly the way it happened; although I couldn't use the original finish.

Mr. Walt Disney tried to do it something like twenty-nine years later, made a picture and called it by its original name- The Great Locomotive Chase, [1956]. He couldn't use the real finish either. Disney wasn't trying to make it funny. He was trying to show the real thing in the dramatics. A spy story. He was told maybe he better go run my picture first- and he wouldn't do it.

Well, Disney made a very bad mistake and told the story from a Northerner's standpoint; he's trying to make villains out of the Confederate Army. You can't





do that to a motion picture audience- for some reason they resent it. And the same goes if I was in Michigan, Maine, Massachusetts. They lost the war anyhow, so the audience resents it.

That was the first mistake he made.

Then Disney makes the mistake of putting Fess Parker in the lead, as a Northerner, and it's awful hard, to make heroes out of the Northerners. You can always make villains out of the Northerners, but you cannot make a villain out of the South.¹⁷⁴

We knew better; when the story ended, the South was winning. This was correct.

Another thing he didn't tell you, too, because he couldn't put it on the screen and get a very happy ending to it. In the real story all eight of those men were captured, and the Southerners took all of those guys and hanged them. They felled one big pine tree, dropped it into a crutch, and put eight horses under there with eight ropes and pulled all eight horses out at the same time and dropped all eight men at once. That wouldn't make a very good finish, but that was the real finish to the story.¹⁷⁵

I tell you one thing I was kind of proud of myself for. I made that picture in '26. Walt Disney did it thirty years later, and I guarantee you we had a better picture.

J,B.: How did the plot develop apart from the historical story line- the involvement with the girl and so on?

Well, the moment you give me a locomotive and things like that to play with, as a rule I find some way of getting laughs with it. Railroads are a great prop. You can do some awful wild things with railroads. From the time I had to desert with my engine it becomes the real story. But the original locomotive chase ended when I found myself in Northern territory. Well, I stuck to all the detail of that, and then, where their story ended, I added on my own continuity- to get a finish to the picture. From then on it was my invention, I wrote my own finish, and rounded out the story of stealing my engine back in order to get a complete plot. It had nothing to do with the Civil War.

All this took place in 1862, and the South lost in 1864, so when my picture ended the South was winning, which was all right with me. . .

Gabourie went to the original Alabama-Tennessee terrain and reported that no narrow-gauge track was left there. He wired,

"Can we use regular gauge?"

"No."

I had to have narrow gauge railroads, because the Civil War trains were narrow-gauge. And the railroad beds of that time were pretty crude; they didn't have so much gravel to put between the ties, and you always saw grass growing there.

Gabe wired, 'General in Chattanooga depot. Taking measurements.'
I went to the original location, from Atlanta, Georgia, up to Chattanooga, and the scenery didn't look very good. In fact, it looked terrible.

The railroad tracks I couldn't use at all.

Did the actual locomotive 'The General' appear in the film?

Oh no, no. We reproduced that. Because that original locomotive they'd never have let that one out of the depot in Chattanooga... I believe they moved it to Atlanta, Georgia. Because the run of 'The General' was from Atlanta to Chattanooga- that's where this chase took place.

¹⁷⁴[Almost any American would understand this. Disregarding any moral issues, the South, fighting against massively superior odds, consistently outfought and out-generaled the North. It was heroic, but futile. It is hardly possible, dramatically speaking, to cast an underdog as a villain.]

¹⁷⁵[According to the book of lists, seven were executed, eight escaped and six more were paroled and awarded the congressional medal of honour.]

Gabe went to the Oregon lumber country, and wired, 'Terrain ideal. Plenty narrow gauge. Have two locomotives.'

In Oregon the whole state is honeycombed with narrow-gauge railroads for all the lumber mills. He brought back location photographs, sketch maps, and a lumber company's permission to film on their virgin timberland.

So I found trains going through valleys, mountains, by little lakes and mountain streams- anything I wanted. So I went to Oregon.

"How's the story?" Gabe asked.

"Set." I said. Gabourie said,

"Good. Now work fast. Telephone the governor up there and you can get the whole damned Oregon State Guard for the war scenes."

It was already June.

"Well," said the governor, "I don't know.... We have two regiments going into camp in two weeks."

"We'll pay them a salary on top of yours." I said.

"All right, they're yours."

So I told Gabourie.

"Rent two thousand Union uniforms, and two thousand Confederate uniforms, and equipment."

It was shot up around Cottage Grove, Oregon. Because not only the scenery was perfect for it, but all the narrow-gauge railroads from those lumber camps (were there). And so much of the equipment, because we brought engines up there, and then Gabe dispatched a crew and with very little work remodelled three locomotives into exact outward replicas of Civil War engines. Luckily, the engines working on these lumber camps were all so doggone old that they even had burners. So it was an easy job - very little work - to convert the locomotives into 'The General' and 'The Texas'. At that period they didn't pay much attention to the numbers of engines- they named them all. That's why the main engine was called 'The General' and the one I chased it with was 'Texas'. It was the 'Texas' I threw through the burning bridge.

Then we built a passenger train and a freight train on their flat cars. They had the rolling stock for us. So we just built box cars and passenger coaches; and all the track in the world we wanted to use was already laid for us. And it looked aged, which we wanted, and badly- you know- they don't bother keepin' it looking good, they don't care what grows around it... I wanted it that way.

J.B.: There is a moment of almost pathetic beauty, which is a gag at the same time, when you are both sitting on the steering rod of the wheel and the train starts to move. Not at the very end, but towards the middle of the film.

I was alone on it when it moved. We were afraid to put her on it, or I would have moved it at the finish.

J.B.: Can you remember how that gag came to you, out of the film's situation?

Well, the situation of the picture at that point is that she says 'Never speak to me again until you're in uniform.' So the bottom has dropped out of everything, and I've got nothing to do but sit down on my engine and think. I don't know why they rejected me: they didn't tell me it was because they didn't want to take a locomotive engineer off his duty.

My fireman wants to put the engine away in the round-house and doesn't know that I'm sitting on the cross bar, and starts to take it in.

I was running that engine myself all through the picture: I could handle that thing

so well I was stopping it on a dime.

But when it came to this shot I asked the engineer whether we could do it. He said: "There's only one danger. A fraction too much steam with these old-fashioned engines and the wheel spins. And if it spins it will kill you right then and there."

We tried it out four or five times, and in the end the engineer was satisfied that he could handle it. So we went ahead and did it.

I wanted a fade-out laugh for that sequence: although it's not a big gag it's cute and funny enough to get me a nice laugh.

How did the mounted cannon sequence develop?

We found that. It's an actual gun of the Civil War. The first railroad gun. And we duplicated that cannon. It almost looks like a prop we invented. That's the only thing that scared us when it came to using it. They said, "Everybody's going to say, 'Oh they invented the prop just to get the gag'." But it's an actual reproduction of a railroad gun built in the Civil War... We found it in more than one book.

Loyal T. Lucas. Actor and friend: "He said

"The only thing that saved our lives on that was a pair of tweezers."

I said "What do you mean?" He said

"Well the first time we loaded the cannon we only wanted the cannonball to just go, phut! and land in the engine cab. First time we did it, it was a good thing we were going round a curve because it went *whango* and missed the car completely and landed over in a field someplace. So then we put in a little bit less, and it still went too far. We finally wound up pushing the kernels of the gunpowder aside and just counting kernels into the thing, finally got it so that when it went off it went phut."

A great deal of the chase was shot...from a vehicle, tracking alongside from the road. The tracking shots are perfectly timed so that the engine is held center of frame, and there is no vibration. Keaton fitted Westinghouse shock absorbers on the automobile and used a road scraper to smooth the surface down before shooting.

That happened often.

[...'brilliantly conceived and executed gags such as in Keaton's Sherlock Jr. being greeted by gasps of astonishment rather than laughter'...]

Another one of those was in *The General*, when I dislodge one railroad tie by hitting it with another. They laugh later a little bit.

J.G.: What many of us like about your films is the treatment of the women. These poor ladies, like Marian Mack in '*The General*', are subjected to all kinds of humiliations and yet they battle on. They get pulled and pushed around, but they always stand by you. Did they mind at all?

No, no. They didn't mind at all. Oh God, that girl in '*The General*' had more fun with that picture than any film she'd made in her life.

(At this point Keaton's face, hitherto frozen as usual, eased into a wide, knowing smile.)

I guess it's because so many leading ladies in those days looked as though they had just walked out of a beauty parlor. They always kept them looking that way- even in covered wagons, they kept their leading ladies looking beautiful at all times. We said, "To thunder with that, we'll dirty ours up a bit and let them have some rough treatment."

Marian Mack: "When I went out that morning I was made up and all ready to work and I didn't know that they were going to make a scene with the waterspout aimed for me, that when the train would stop, they would let me have it; but they didn't tell me they were going to do this. So the scene you see in the movie, that was quite a surprise, (laughs) and I was pretty angry about it, so, (laughs) I let him have it. (laughs).

Raymond Rohauer: Now tell me, Marion, how did you get to work with Keaton in 'The General'?

Marian Mack: Buster was looking for an old-fashioned girl, with long curly hair, for the character of Annabelle Lee, because they wanted everything to look just right for the Civil War period.

Well, Percy Westmore, who was making up Norma Talmadge for some picture, heard this from her, and of course she knew it because her sister, Natalie, was married to Keaton. And Percy mentioned that he knew a girl with just the right hair, because he had been my make-up man on 'Carnival Girl'. And Norma said to Percy he should try to find out if I was available, and he called me and first thing he said was: "I hope you still have those long curls you had in 'Carnival Girl'!" Well, this was the year everyone was bobbing their hair, and so only about a couple of days before I cut my hair short too, and I told it to Percy and he said,

"Don't worry, we'll give you a fall or something." A fall, you know, a wig. So that's what I wore to the interview with Buster Keaton.

He was there, but he didn't say much. The guys who really talked to me were Lou Anger, the studio manager, and Clyde Bruckman. And then they sort of looked at Buster, and Buster said he thought I would do, and so I was hired right then and there.

R.R. Up to this time, had you ever met Keaton?

M.M. No, this was the first time. But, of course, everybody in town knew about him, he was well known, but he didn't get around to many of the smart parties and places, and stuck pretty much to his own pals.

R.R. How long did it take to shoot the picture?

M.M. We were six months on it. Actually we went up to Oregon twice. First in the Spring, around April, we stayed about four months. Then we went back to Hollywood in September to do the studio scenes, and in October we went back to Cottage Grove for some more outdoor shooting.

R.R. How was it set up on location?

M.M. We all stayed at the Cottage Grove Hotel, and every morning we took that little train which you can see in the picture, and we rode out to location. Buster had his own chef with him, Willy his name was, and he prepared hot lunch on location so that we could stay there all day.

R.R. How did they shoot the picture? Was there a script?

M.M. They used what I think today would be called just an outline. Not a real script as we now know it.

I mean, they told you what the scene was, but you were expected to make up your own bits of business, and if anybody had an idea they would try it and see how it played. Like when I have the scene where I'm getting on the train Buster is driving, and I'm still supposed to be mad at him for not enlisting.

I made a big business out of admiring the medal my brother was wearing, just to show how much I admired him, because of course I know Buster is looking at me. And this was not in any script, but they said it looked cute and so it stayed in.

R.R. Can you think of any other incidents like that where you improvised right on camera?

M.M. Oh yes, we did that all the time.

You know the scene on the engine where I'm supposed to feed the fire, I'm supposed to be a little dumb about it.

So somebody said I should get hold of a log with a knothole in it, and throw it away. I did that, but I didn't think the audience would understand it, and then I saw a very small piece of wood, and I picked it up and threw it in. Buster liked it, so right away he built it up; I mean he picked up an even smaller piece,

just a splinter really, to see if I would be dumb enough to use that, too. And of course I did, and so he jumped on me as if he was going to choke me, but at the last moment he really gave me a little peck on the cheek. I think I got that kiss more for thinking of the gag than anything else.

And none of this was in written form at all.

Molly Haskell: 'In 'The General' there is the scene (Andrew Sarris has rightly called it 'one of the most glorious celebrations of heterosexual love in the history of the cinema') in which Keaton turns to his girlfriend, who is busily stoking the engine of the train with pieces of wood the size of pencils, makes as if to strangle her, and suddenly changes his mind and kisses her.'

R.R. Did you get to know Keaton very well as a person?

M.M. Buster was really a shy person. Some people said he was aloof, but his aloofness was mostly just shyness, I think.

He wasn't easy to know very closely. Off screen, he always had his friends to play baseball with; why, sometimes they stopped the train when they saw a place to play baseball, and everything would be delayed by a couple of hours. And also, he had Natalie with him there, so there wasn't much socializing, actually.

I had never worked with a leading man like that before, I can tell you, usually they were outgoing and chummy, but Buster just stuck to the job and to his little clique, and that was all.

At first I felt a little bit, I'd say, ignored or slighted, but then he got a bit more friendly as he lost some of his shyness, and he turned out to be a very nice warm person. And a very humble one, too, that's the surprising part.

R.R. When did you feel the ice was broken?

M.M. I guess when he started playing jokes on me. In his book, when he made you the butt of some practical joke, that meant you were OK. Funny you should mention breaking ice, one of the first gags he ever played on me was to have a couple of the guys grab me from behind and hang me upside down over a cake of ice as we were on the way to the location train. I already had my make-up on, which took about an hour to do, and all of it got ruined and I was very uncomfortable, so as soon as they put me down again I went and punched Buster in the eye.

It gave him such a shiner they had to stop shooting for a week.

This was before I understood that he meant me no harm.

He'd go to any length to get a laugh, but there was no malice in his practical jokes.

R.R. So he kept it up even after you hit him in the eye?

M.M. Oh boy, he sure did. Like the time he found out that sometimes I used to like to take my bike and go up about three miles from Cottage Grove to a spot on the river that was nice and secluded, and there I would swim.

So he and a couple of his buddies sneaked up after me one day, and found where I left my clothes and tied them up in such knots that I couldn't unravel them. And so I had to pedal back to Cottage Grove in my bathing suit, and this was quite a shocking thing to do in 1926, you simply didn't ride a bike in your bathing suit in those days, and a wet one at that!

R.R. Did Buster play any tricks on you in front of the camera?

M.M. Yes, he did.

You know, I was told at the beginning that there would be a double to do all the stunts, and a girl was actually hired and was standing by, so I was satisfied.¹⁷⁶ But then, as Buster got to know me better I guess he decided I was a good sport, and would you believe it, they never used that girl once as far as I know.

Like in the scene where I'm in the sack and Buster is supposed to step all over me. He told me to get in the sack, and then they would cut and let the other girl replace me for the rough stuff. But next thing I knew, he was stepping all over me, and the cameras were grinding. But I didn't get mad at him that time. I must say he knew just how to do it so it wouldn't hurt me. I guess it was

¹⁷⁶[Louise??]

his vaudeville training.

R.R. Is that you in the scene on top of the box car where you are drenched from the water tank?

M.M. That was another time when Buster said all I had to do was help set up the scene, and then they would cut and the extra would get a soaking. Now, as soon as we're up there Buster grabs the big spout and it comes off accidentally the wrong way, and we get all wet. Right away, Buster realized it was probably funny, and so now he puts the spout in the right way but also pulls the wire that releases the water, and I got soaked a second time. So I got it twice, and both times I didn't know it was coming, so the surprise you see on my face up there is for real. Boy, I sure was as wet as a drowned rat that time. But it would never have looked so good if it hadn't really happened by accident the first time, and if Buster hadn't helped it a little the second time.¹⁷⁷ He had all his crew trained to keep the cameras running even if something unexpected happened, you never knew what was going to turn out good when you saw it on the screen.

R.R. Do you remember the scene where you're climbing through a small opening in one of the cars? Was it really as hard as it looked?

M.M. Buster wanted it to look as if we were having a hard time, so I had to put out one leg first and pretend I couldn't quite make it, and then try it the other way. Actually, with those long skirts it was a bit awkward, and also the train was actually moving, so there was some danger. I'm sure they would never do it today with the real stars, they'd have stunt men or they'd fake the train motion in some way by back projection. But in those days we never gave it a second thought, we just did it.

R.R. When you get into the sack the first time, there in the woods when Buster is supposed to pick you up, was that really you in there when he lifts it?

M.M. Yes, again, like I told you, he was supposed to let the other girl get in, she was about ten pounds lighter, anyway, and so I didn't think Buster would be too anxious to lug me around. But, as I told you, by now I think he got used to me, and so he always found a way to keep me in the scene. But you know, in this scene another accident happened which they left in; he is supposed to empty the sack which is full of Army boots, and when he did it his own shoes came off and for a while he couldn't find the right ones among all the other shoes. It was never planned but since it looked funny, they kept it in the picture. And then he gets me in the sack and all of a sudden I feel he's picking me up, but he was stronger than I thought, and it never fazed him a bit. And that's really my hand you see uncoupling the wagons from inside the sack later.

R.R. Which scenes were done in the studio in Hollywood?

M.M. Very few, really.

The one that gave us the most trouble was the night scene when Buster and I are running away from the cottage. We were three weeks doing that, and even here in the studio he wanted to do it as true to life as possible, and so we did it on the back lot at night, with rain and wind machines. We came in every night at about 7, and stayed until maybe one a.m., and this went on for three weeks, and each night we got soaked to the skin, it's a wonder we didn't catch pneumonia. But as I said, we just never thought much about it. It had to be done, so we did it.

R.R. What other scenes did you do in Hollywood?

M.M. The indoor scenes, but as you know there were only a few. Some of the supposed indoor scenes, like the one with Buster in the recruiting office, these were actually done in Cottage Grove outdoors, with fake walls but no ceiling. Also the scene at the beginning, where Buster comes to call on me and I sort of play a trick on him and follow him to my house, that was all done up on location.

R.R. How many times did you usually run through a scene?

M.M. Most of them Buster okayed after one or two takes.

The only ones that had to be timed to precision were the gags, and they sometimes took five or six tries. But they also shot

¹⁷⁷[It doesn't look like an accident to me.]

quite a few whole scenes which were never used in the finished picture, because Buster was a perfectionist, and he only used the best scenes. That's why the whole film is so tightly edited, he took out all the scenes which would have dragged it out.

R.R. Did you see Keaton anymore after the filming?

M.M. Yes, we remained friends and saw him off and on.

I remember one time, right after we finished 'The General', we were invited to a New Year's Eve party in Caliente, at a night club owned by Joe Schenck, and Buster did one of his famous slides. As I told you, he would go anywhere for a laugh, and he did one of the bits he learned on stage, slid on his stomach right across the whole dance floor. And the reason he did it, he saw Peggy [Hopkins] Joyce, she was one of the supposed glamor girls with more jewellery than anyone in the world, sitting there across the floor, so he did the slide and pretended to get all mixed up and accidentally on purpose he tipped over her chair and spilled her all over the floor.

I guess he just wanted to take her down a peg.

R.R. There was a lot of publicity about Buster's drinking problem. Did you ever witness any excessive drinking?

M.M. No, that came later. He certainly never drank while working, at least not so that it would affect him, or I'm sure I would have noticed. This was still when he was in top form.

Marian Mack interviewed by Raymond Rohauer.

Were there more people involved in making that film than in any of your others?

Well, when it comes to do the battle scenes, I hired the Oregon National Guard. Got 500 men there. And we managed to locate about 125 horses. Then in getting the equipment up from Los Angeles, we had to have a lot of it made. We had to have artillery pieces and army saddles and stuff like that and uniforms for both gray and blue...

I housed the men up there for a week in tourist cars given to us by the Union Pacific on a siding. We put up a big tent for a mess hall. And put 'em in blue uniforms and bring 'em going from right to left. and take 'em out, put 'em in gray uniforms, bring 'em goin' from left to right (laughs). And fought the war.

John Wilson, (18 year old private with Oregon National Guard):

"They issued no shoes, you had no shoes, but each guy was counted out with his uniform. I do recall though that we had lots of caps; but uniforms.. we had about 200 of the grey and about 300 or so of the blue and not enough to make distribution of it."

Uncredited member of National Guard: "They treated us just like we were in a regular army, they had us come to attention, and measure off for distance, and then they had us number off and they give us all our directions, and what we were supposed to do, and expected us to carry it out."

Randall V. Mills:¹⁷⁸ '.....Those were the wrecks that came from accidents; but the best wreck was planned, and for a while the railroad was afraid it might not even be able to have it. Even yet Cottage Grove remembers with nostalgia that fine time when Old Slow and Easy starred in motion pictures. [The railway was founded in 1902 as The Oregon and Southeastern, or O. & S.E., colloquially, Old Slow

¹⁷⁸[..and introducing Randall V. Mills, 'Railroads Down The Valleys', P. 112-118. Chosen,

A.) for it's impartiality, due to the fact that it's main focus is the local running life of the railway,

B.) for it's wealth for corroboratable detail,

C.) for it's consistency with the horse's mouths already collected,

D.) for it's rare picture of the life of the Buster Keaton Film Company on location, and

E.) because so much of its detail has been used as background by so many previous writers.]

and Easy.] It did a good job too and gave the town something to talk about for the next twenty years.

[The civil war story as described] almost inevitably became part of a motion picture scenario. In 1926 it did when Buster Keaton made plans to film the whole story. Obviously he could not use the original trackage, but his scouts reported that Old Slow and Easy would do nicely. It looked old, had old equipment, ran through country that looked like northwest Georgia, and generally was well-suited to the job.

Thus did Old Slow and Easy put on grease paint and do some acting. Keaton's forces arrived in Cottage Grove with a string of eighteen cars loaded with equipment, including a batch of Civil War type passenger cars, rebuilt from discarded Pacific Electric trolleys (the least realistic detail in the picture), and began building sets, some of them, like that for Big Shanty, whole towns, scattered up and down the length of the railroad. For the part of the General, old Four-Spot was chosen; for Texas, which in the picture was going to be wrecked (the big wreck), an old engine from the Mount Hood Railroad was purchased; and for Yonah, a freight engine, the O.P. & E.'s Number Three was selected. It was a revival of glory for Three; she had started life hauling trains of silver ore on the Virginia and Truckee, had been sold to the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company when the Comstock ran into Borasca, had been sold again as overage to the Salem, Falls City & Western Railroad, and eventually had landed on Old Slow and Easy to spend her declining years. All three engines went to shops at Dallas, Oregon, to be refitted and doctored to look their parts. It did not require much effort; they looked old to start with.

When filming began, half of Cottage Grove turned out to watch the other half sweat during the summer days in Civil War uniforms. To provide drilled and marching units of extras, the motion picture company hired units of the National Guard and brought them in by trainloads. For dressing and property rooms, the entire second floor of the town's largest garage was leased and fitted. A commissary was established to prepare hot meals for actors and extras at the front. All went along smoothly; the efficiency of the Hollywood crews was amazing but furnished few memories. Better were the inefficient moments. For instance, there was a horse that would not act. Supposed to shy at one of the movie trains in a setting built to resemble a Southern town, the horse paid not the slightest attention to the engine but stood resigned and wondering why everybody yelled at it- and spoiled a lot of film.¹⁷⁹

Half an hour later, hauling the same carriage with the same actors aboard, the horse came up to the Southern Pacific crossing, took one look at the engine at work there, and had seven varieties of fits, nearly wrecking the buggy and scaring the actors loose from their make-up.

Up and down the railroad clattered the movie trains, while cameramen cranked taking shots of all kinds of sequences in the baffling lack of order that is usual to movie making. Lone engines raced back and forth. Trains backed and returned. Sweaty extras marched, countermarched, and sat around waiting to march some more. Fields and hillsides were crowded by sightseers. Civil War cannon boomed and banged. Musketry spattered during battle scenes. Spent wads lit fires in the stubble, and crews doused them. The regular train left Cottage Grove at five in the morning so that the whole line would be free for the movies all day long- and the July Fourth shutdown of the Anderson-Middleton mill made log trains unnecessary. Sparks from the woodburning engines started more fires, and forest rangers swore while they batted and fought. One fire nearly got away and did burn down the depot at Red Bridge before it was checked. Another became memorable mainly because the star himself, Buster Keaton, had to gallop out of his dressing-tent, clad only in his B.V.D.'s (a sort of loose fitting undergarment that was replacing the long-handled red flannels) to help fight it.'

¹⁷⁹[Shot number 3 [excluding the cast list] in 'The General; the horse is decidedly unsurprised.]



Sparks from 'The General's wood burning smokestack set off a forest fire. Under Buster's direction the fire was put out. Sadly Lou Anger entered the emergency item: 'To timber burned. \$11,751.00.'

"Actually," he said, brightening a little, "it should read: 'To one captaincy for Buster Keaton'." The governor had given him an honorary commission for directing the fire fighting.

They got the fire out with no trouble, but there was so much smoke that they couldn't shoot. And they had to wait for a rain to come and clear out the smoke. That could be up to 6 weeks or 7 weeks, or whenever, so they had to pack the whole thing in and come back to L.A. and wait for a rain. And then when they finally got a rainstorm and that cleared the smoke out then they went back up and finished the picture. So that drove the budget up considerably.

R.V. Mills: 'Near Disston the General, according to the script, was to leave a burning boxcar in a covered bridge; then the Texas was to come along and push the car ahead of it out of the burning span. Motion picture carpenters built a rough covering for the railroad bridge, splashed it with kerosine, shoved in the boxcar, and started the fire. The Texas came along, hit the car, and rushed through, trailing smoke and flame, and right behind the Texas came firemen to put out the fire and so keep the bridge from being destroyed. They did, but not until some timbers were so charred they had to be replaced.

The big scene, the climax, the spectacle, the thriller, was the wreck. For it, an abandoned lumber spur just above Culp Creek was relaid, and by working furiously, carpenters built in a few days a tall, spindly log bridge 215 feet long across the Row River. In the hot summer, the Row River dwindles to a brook, and to have enough water so that the wreck would be gaudy, a log-crib dam was built downstream; it would be dynamited at the right time, and the water would then look less like a millpond. Everything went fine that day. Early in the morning a passenger train for cameramen, stars, and such folk, went up from Cottage Grove; behind it came a train of boxcars carrying the extras who represented the troops, and finally, dejectedly, trailed the Texas, on her way to sacrifice. Every road was packed with automobiles full of sightseers. Every cow-path had its share of ambling Fords. Every hillside was massed by spectators, the wiser ones with lunches. Already the General had been filmed doing its part; all that remained was the wreck itself. The cameras were set to roll at ten o'clock. Technicians poured gasoline on the bridge and fastened cables to ensure that the bridge and engine would crash at the right time. Uniformed extras ran through battle sequences. The Texas, steam up, waited at the edge.

Noon came, and still the cameramen were not ready. Then the technicians had to do some more tinkering. And then the cameras had to be shifted. More sightseers arrived. A train carrying lunches for the actors rumbled in from Cottage Grove. There was a pause. Finally at three o'clock everything was ready; the director waved his megaphone. A prop man tossed a match onto the gasoline-soaked bridge. In the cab of the Texas the engineer eased open the throttle and then scrambled off the locomotive, leaving it to a dummy propped up in the window. Slowly the Texas moved out into the fire; the bridge sagged nicely as she hesitated. Then the crews hauled hard on the cables, and with a crash the bridge gave way, tipping the engine toward the camera and dropping it in a shower of fire, steam, and cascading water into the river below. The cameramen cranked, and the crowd of spectators yelled. It was really a very fine wreck, worth waiting all day to see.'

I planned the scene with Gabourie and a couple of his right-hand men, one of them a blacksmith. We had a forge and a blacksmith's shop right on the lot.

We built that bridge and dammed up water underneath so the stream would look better.

Extras came from miles around to be in the picture. None of them were experienced- we had to train them. And when we did the battle scenes, I got the State Guard of Oregon. That location was around twelve hundred miles from Hollywood.

Keith Fennel: [The battle scene]..."was very exciting and a little bit alarming because there were shells going off, and they had explosions going off, and they blew parts of trees to pieces, and the horses had riders on them that weren't the greatest riders in the world, and some of them were falling off.... I know it was kind of scary as far as I was concerned."

Uncredited member of Oregon National guard: "One of them," [explosions] "was too close to Buster Keaton, and it knocked him over and knocked him unconscious, and he lay there on the ground for quite some time unconscious. They finally brought him to, and he rested up awhile and got back on the job."

The single take of the train going to its death reputedly cost Joe Schenck \$42,000, probably the most expensive single take in silent films up to that time.

Photoplay, 27 March, 1927: 'A whole train is wrecked in a deep ravine, if that means anything to you.'

Marian Mack: "You know back in 1927 neither Buster nor the producers thought much of the picture. It was a routine comedy, but they didn't make any big fuss about opening it, no personal appearances or anything. And also, by that time I had other interests, and in fact I was practically out of the picture business when the film opened- at least out of the acting stage of the business."

Herald-Tribune: 'Long and tedious- the least funny thing Buster Keaton has ever done.'

Daily Telegraph: 'a pretty trite and stodgy piece of screenfare, a rehash, pretentiously garnered of any old two-reel chase comedy... The audience received 'The General' with polite attention, occasionally a laugh, and occasionally a yawn. Disappointing.'

N.Y. Times.Mordaunt Hall: 'This is by no means as good as Mr. Keaton's previous efforts.'

Also: ...vaulting ambition....a mixture of cast iron and jelly..'

Variety: ''The General' is far from funny.'

Life Magazine: 'Many of his gags are in gruesomely bad taste.'
Robert E. Sherwood was a little upset by the fact that you showed men being killed in a comedy.

Well, he was a little sensitive about that, because you've had to kill people in comedies. You've done that for years. But as a rule, if we could help it, we didn't.

Only the Brooklyn Eagle recognised it as a work of genius: 'Probably lots of people... will not think it funny at all.... I give you 'The General' a comedy for the exclusive enjoyment of the matured senses.... Buster Keaton has made a financial faux pas, perhaps...'

Now this was my own story, my own continuity, I directed the picture, I cut it and titled it. And I had a successful picture. I was pretty proud of it at the time. So actually it was my pet. Not my biggest money-maker though- that was The Navigator.

Domestic Gross. \$474,264. Negative cost. \$415,232. (G.A.T.Dardis.)

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE.

A bad thing to get started.

1927. College.

SEPTEMBER. COLLEGE. 1927.

A good example of a lighthearted plot is College, in which I played an honor student in high school who finds out he is unpopular with his girl, and everyone else, after he denounces college athletics. To win back his girl he decides to go in for sports.

Oh- one of the best gags in it was I was at the Coliseum doing a warm-up with all the other athletes. No people in the grand-stand... I tried to be an athlete, and of course I flunked everything then, until I got into a jam. They made me coxswain of the boat in order to make an athlete out of me. I liked College..

'She [Florence Turner, playing Buster's mother] was in movies long before me, [since 1907] and she's a real trouper.' (Picture caption.)

Did you ever use a double?

Only for special things- There was only one occasion in all my years in pictures [to 1930], in which I used a double. That's one of a pole vault into a second-storey in College. I could not do the scene because I'm no pole vaulter and I didn't want to spend months in training to do the stunt myself. That was when I went and I hired Lee Barnes from USC- he was the Olympic champion, the world's champion pole vaulter. When it comes to pole vaulting into a window- I mean, you've got to get somebody who knows what they're doing.

Molly Haskell. 'In Keaton's College, the happily-ever-after ending was ironically undercut by successive shots of the couple with children, the couple grown old, and the headstones of two graves, a startlingly corrosive ending for a romantic comedy.'

The trouble all started with Schenck taking Lou Anger from me. He wanted him to go round the country finding new theater locations for United Artists. Great- a promotion for Lou. Schenck said,

"Who shall we make business manager?" I said,

"Why not take my publicity man, Harry Brand?" So that was okay.

But once he was on the job he suddenly turned serious. He was grim. He was watching the dailies- how much is spent on this, how much is spent on that? He worries, he frets, he begins losing sleep. He felt he had to do something, like a guy that has to tear down a car that's running perfectly.

Harry Brand got me to use James Horne [as director, screen credit given.] who was absolutely useless to me. He hadn't done many pictures, and no important ones. Incidentals, quickies. I don't know why we had him, because I practically did College. Carl Harbaugh was also given screen credit for writing College and 'Steamboat Bill, Jr.', but Keaton said he was one of the most useless men he ever had on the scenario department.

He wasn't a good gag man, he wasn't a good title writer, he wasn't a good story constructionist. But I had to put somebody's name up, and he was on salary with us.

I'd finished cutting College, previewed it, and run the sample print to test the printing. You know, some scenes too light, some too dark- have to be evened up. Then



we went to Sacramento to film Steamboat Bill, Jr..¹⁸⁰ While we're there, just getting under way, College is released, and we all went to the Senator Theater to see it. The credits flash on: Joseph M. Schenck Presents Buster Keaton in College. United Artists Release. Written by, directed by, etcetera. And then, a separate title: Supervised by Harry Brand.

I all but jumped out of my seat. It had gone into the prints after I okayed the sample. It had been done quietly and with Schenck's permission. The prints- two hundred and fifty of them- were all distributed. The thing couldn't be changed.

Now perhaps it sounds like conceit on my part. But besides my own feelings, there were two things. One was the question of interference. A bad thing to get started. The other thing was, the public was already beginning to laugh at this stupid supervisor deal, which had then been going on in Hollywood for about six months. Supervisor was only a job maker, a nothing job, just a title- but it did get a guy's name on the screen. Anger never bothered with screen credit. He knew his job and did it. Within two or three years supervisors were laughed off the screen, but at this time every new guy getting into the game was becoming a supervisor.

For some people credits are like candy. I had laid the laugh on Ince years before with my Playhouse. But they just never learn. Why even Mervyn LeRoy, one of our old and good Directors, had a radio sign-off credit: this is the So-and-so Show, starring Mary Livingston, Jack Benny, Don Wilson, Kenny Baker- and on through the cast- through the courtesy of Mervyn LeRoy! Jack Benny teed off on that one. He ran an imaginary Kentucky Derby, with Don Wilson doing the description of the race, winding up with, "And here they come, folks. They're crossing the finish line, with Malicious in the rear, by courtesy of Mervyn LeRoy!"

Well, I was badly upset by this deal in my own picture. But I thought, There's no point in battling Brand. I'll wait and see Schenck.

I told him,

"It's bad on the face of it, for example, Doug Fairbanks comes on, and you say, 'Douglas Fairbanks supervised by Joe Doakes.' You belittle Fairbanks. Fairbanks, not Doakes, is what you're selling. One man writes it, another man directs it, and a star acts it. Those three people are responsible for every great picture that was ever made. In some cases one man is all three- Chaplin."¹⁸¹

Schenck replied that supervisors were the modern thing; all the big studio's were doing it.

"Maybe they are, and they can be wrong, it's not going to last long. The whole damned thing's a bad joke. There'll be no more supervisors in the pictures Buster Keaton makes."

Schenck says there'll be no more Schenck/Keaton productions. The company was being dissolved.

"Why?"

Throughout the twenties one of the great social events each year was the New Year's Eve party given by Joe Schenck at the Casino at Tijuana. James J. Croffroth, the old-time boxing promoter, and Baron Long, the man who ran the Casino, tried to make it the Western Hemisphere's first complete playground for adults.

But its main lure to people in our part of the Prohibition-harried United States was its accessibility as a legal drinking place.

¹⁸⁰[A broken nose just before shooting meant filming longshots first.]

¹⁸¹[And, of course, Keaton.]

I had one of my goofiest adventures there because of a beautiful woman whom I was eager to stay as far away from as possible. What happened to men who didn't was depressing even to think about.

The woman was Mary Nolan, the blonde, slim, and gorgeous M-G-M movie star who had been Imogene (Bubbles) Wilson in the days when she was a Ziegfeld show girl and universally acclaimed the most beautiful girl on Broadway.

Frank Tinney, the stage comedian, was the first of her ill-starred admirers, and he didn't even fall in love with her. She fell in love with him. Before she fell out of love with mild little Frank he had lost his wife, his home, his life savings, his job, and his reputation. All he acquired in exchange was the police record he got when she had him arrested for beating her up. There were several such beatings, one so severe that the hospital doctor who examined Imogene said,

"This woman looks as though she'd been hit by an automobile." Imogene sued Tinney for \$100,000, then pursued him to London where he was trying to start a new career for himself. There was a reconciliation and more beatings. It all ended when Frank returned to America and went into one mental hospital after another.

It was the end of his career but only the beginning of hers, for Imogene went on to Berlin where she became a screen star under the name of Imogene Robertson. She also continued getting into the newspapers, first as the companion of King Alfonso of Spain, who gave her a bejeweled brooch and a weekend in the royal palace, and later of a German baron who carried her off to a castle on the Rhine.

As Mary Nolan she became an M-G-M star and the sweetheart of one of its top executives. He also beat her up so badly that she was again taken to a hospital. From her room there she phoned him and got him into such a rage that he went down to the hospital and beat her up all over again. Subsequently she sued this lover for half a million dollars.

However this double assault on Mary occurred some years after the New Year's party at Tijuana. Among the other guests present were Tom Mix, Gary Cooper, John Barrymore, Richard Dix, Buster Collier, Louis Wolheim, David Wark Griffith, and several younger performers, including one who was just becoming famous. He was there with the girl he later married. As they are still prominent, let's call them Walter and Evelyn.¹⁸² Griffith, the greatest of the early movie directors, had not made a film in years, but his camera eye and romantic story sense never stopped working. They were both at their liveliest on an evening such as this one when, with the rest of us, he was imbibing very select strong waters.

It so happened that Mary Nolan and Walter were sitting opposite him, side by side. And in that young couple he saw beauty and glamour enough to strike the whole world with awe and wonder: the girl, a blonde with a crown of lovely hair, diaphanous skin, the face of an angel with the bluest eyes in Christendom; the boy, handsome with black, curly hair, powerful shoulders, and as unworldly as any youth from the backwoods.

Griffith's wrinkled, eaglelike face lighted up as he studied them. He seemed enraptured.

"Are you two engaged?" he asked.

"No." said Walter, shyly smiling at Miss Nolan. Apparently he had forgotten for the moment that his girl was sitting at his other elbow.

¹⁸²[Another mystery for a movie detective, with that much information Marlowe could tell us by this afternoon.]

"What a pity." said Griffith in that benevolent old Southerner's voice he had used to charm great performances out of Dick Barthelmess, the Gish girls, and so many others¹⁸³. He added softly,

"Why don't you think of it?" Swept away, the screen's first master storyteller began weaving a real-life romance.

"Why shouldn't you two beautiful young people marry here in these picturesque surroundings of romantic old Mexico? What a union! This young woman who even now is wearing the lovely white evening dress that might well be her wedding gown! And for her groom, this man, one of the most handsome youths in all the world."

Both of them modestly cast down their eyes. But Evelyn looked as though she were turning to stone.

"Why don't you think of it?" repeated the old man in that throbbing and persuasive voice of his. "An enchanting idea, isn't it? To be married as the bells of Old Mexico toll in the New Year."

Everybody at the table by this time had stopped chattering, and even drinking, as he continued:

"Soft music. The ceremony performed in an old monastery. And the church bells. Think of the bells of this quaint, picturesque old country. Each year for centuries they have brought new hope of happiness and freedom to a warmhearted, valiant people. And those old church bells tolling would bring the hope of happiness to you also, my dear children."

"I'm willing." said Mary, who had never had time enough between romances to be married.

"I guess it would be all right." said Walter.

The first opportunity I had after dinner I got hold of Buster Collier and Louis Wolheim and said,

"Let's promote this thing."

Being as mischief-loving as I, they were eager to help. We discussed what important local resident should be asked to tie the knot. The archbishop? The mayor?

Then Wolheim, who'd been a college professor although he didn't look it, pointed out that in a Catholic country like Mexico there might be certain formalities that would delay the ceremony. We decided then that it would have to be a fake wedding. There was a New York lawyer at the party who looked like a Mexican. Someone suggested he might do if he could be persuaded to officiate. It also occurred to us that before long Walter might appreciate the favor we'd done for him in making it merely a fake wedding.

All our wedding plans, though, were canceled quickly by Evelyn, our prospective groom's fiancée.

"Walter," she asked in a honeyed voice, "have you seen how beautiful the moonlight is in the patio?"

"No," he admitted.

"Well, come with me," she told him. He went along obediently, after excusing himself to Mary Nolan.

"Look, darling," exclaimed Evelyn when she had him out there in the clearing, "did you ever see anything so lovely?"

Walter inspected the moonlight but not for very long. He had no more than turned his eyes heavenward than Evelyn reached back to left field. She hit him only with her open hand, but it was such a haymaker that it split his lip and also knocked him into a cactus bush. It took Walter fifteen minutes to tidy himself up enough to be presentable;

¹⁸³[Notably the Talmadge sisters.]

half of that time, the bootblack there said later, was spent pulling the thorns out of his rear.

When he returned to public view he hurried to Evelyn's side and stayed there. Meanwhile Mary Nolan had disappeared - and everybody hoped she'd remain out of sight.

At one o'clock that evening I was at the bar minding my own business, which was for the moment the pleasant business of drinking. Suddenly Mary rushed up to me, seized my hand, and pulled me away. Her breath was coming in little puffs which made her bosom rise and fall in a very attractive manner. While thus distracted, I was led through various rooms, past the gambling tables and another large bar. Pointing to a muscular stranger, she half sobbed,

"There he is!"

"Who?" I asked, staring at the man.

"The man who insulted me."

They say nothing can interrupt gamblers at a craps table, but that fluttering voice did. There seemed to be, in a moment, a thousand faces watching and waiting to see what I would do.

All I could think of were the many husky guys in Schenck's party, romantic, gallant types like John Barrymore and Richard Dix, cowboy stars like Tom Mix. Why had she picked on me to defend her honor, if any?

But I patted her hand and went over to the stranger who by now was glowering. "I don't suppose you did anything," I said in my lowest and most refined voice, "but she's had a few drinks. Why don't you apologize just to shut her up?"

By way of reply, the stranger explained what I could do to Mary, using the filthiest of the four-letter Anglo-Saxon words.

Now Keaton was really on the spot, and everybody seemed entranced. At least none of the men watching us tried to interfere. While I was pondering the problem, and getting pretty damn mad at this clown for compounding Mary's nonsense, he settled matters by saying,

"That goes for you, too."

"You've put me on a fine spot," I told him, "but we're not doing this one for an audience. Let's get down to the back patio where we can settle the whole thing very quickly."

"No," he said.

"What do you mean, no?" I demanded, going up and taking his arm, trying to lead him away. But to the horror of the gamblers, he grabbed and clung to the edge of the nearest craps table, pulling it about three feet. I tried to drag him away, but his grip on the table was tenacious. Meanwhile the chips on the craps table were skittering in all directions with the deeply distressed gamblers trying to restore them to their various positions on and back of the 'Come' line, on the 'Don't come' line, in the 'Field', and the other spots on the green table.

I kept jerking on the big coward's free arm, but I was unable to tear him loose.¹⁸⁴ Finally, not knowing what else to do I walked away, heading toward the bar where I'd been before all the nonsense started. On the way I met Buster Collier and Louis Wolheim and told them what had happened.

On seeing that I was still steamed up, they lured me to a patio where there was a wishing well. They lifted me up and hung me head downward in this.

¹⁸⁴[Anyone who has seen Battling Butler will realise that the big coward's cowardice is actually sensible self preservation.]

"This is a party. Why let a little thing like this upset you?" said Wolheim. Like everyone else Louis was usually philosophical about his friends' troubles.

Needless to say, I was in no position to argue with him. They set me on my feet only after I calmed down. Then we went back into the Casino where Buster Collier got me a drink.

In a little while Mary Nolan came fluttering back.

"Here we go again." I said to Wolheim.

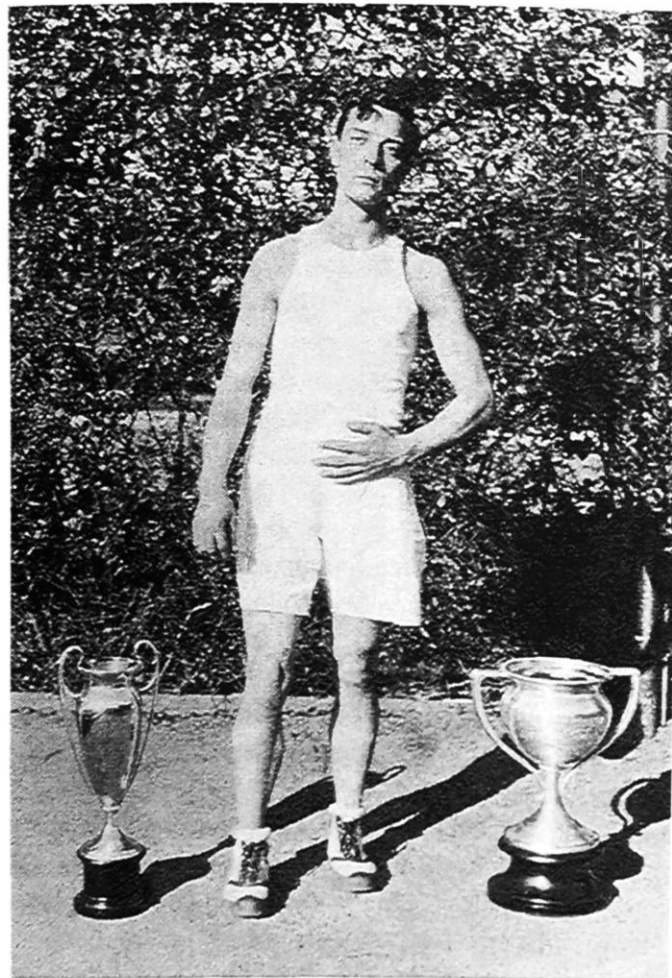
"Forgive me," said she. "Forgive me, Buster, for involving you. I'll explain to your wife so she won't think..."

"Don't bother," I said. "but what did that guy do to you?"

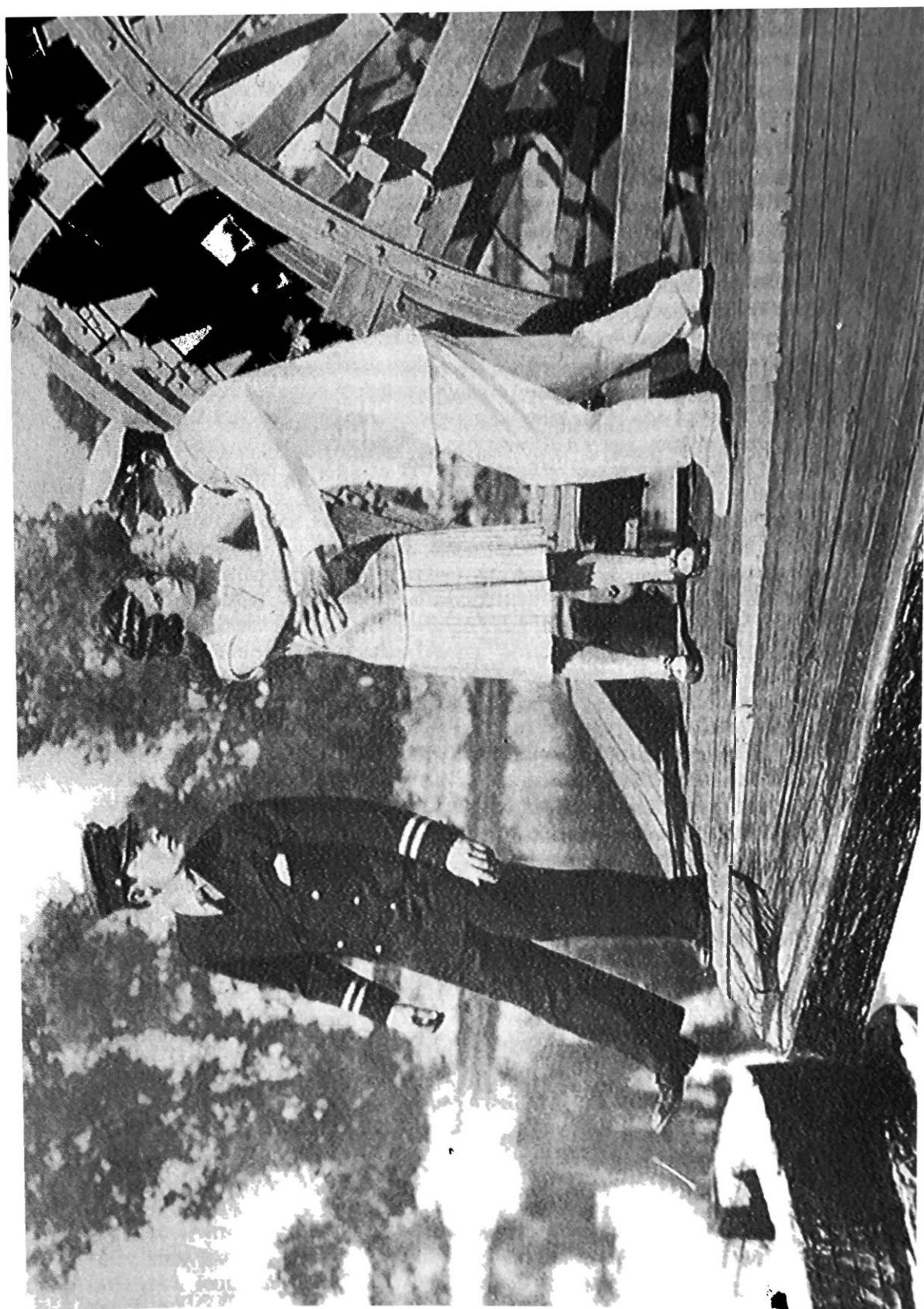
"He put his hand on my breast."

I looked at her very low-cut gown. One of her breasts had tumbled out.

"It probably fell out," I told her, "as it has now. That big coward is also a gentleman. He politely stuffed it out of sight for you. But I'm no gentleman, and this time you'll have to put it back yourself."



COLLEGE.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX.

...my last independently made picture.

1928. Steamboat Bill, Jr.

1928. MAY. STEAMBOAT BILL, JR.

I can best explain what I was up against at MGM., by going back for a moment to Steamboat Bill, Jr., my last independently made picture. The idea of that story was brought to me by Charles (Chuck) Reisner, a burly, brawny actor who had turned director. Some old-time movie fans may remember Chuck Reisner's performance as the father of the tough kid who fought angel-faced Jackie Coogan in Chaplin's 'The Kid'. There have been few funnier scenes on the screen than the one in which the huge Reisner terrifies Chaplin by telling him, "If your kid licks mine, I'll lick you." That made Charlie, who had been rooting for Jackie to win, do everything he could think of to make him lose.

Chuck's story opened with a rugged, old Mississippi steamboat captain reading a letter from his wife. They had a quarrel twenty years before, just after their only child was born. She returned with the baby to her home town in New England. The letter explains that their baby, now a full-grown man, is on his way to see his father for the first time. He will arrive by train on Sunday and will wear a white carnation so his father will recognize him.

But the Sunday I arrive is Mother's day and every man on the train is wearing a white carnation in his buttonhole. Hopefully, my father, Steamboat Bill, approaches one muscular youth after another. But he doesn't find me until the train pulls out because I got off the train on the wrong side. He takes one look at me and groans. I have on a beret and plus fours. I have a ukelele under my arm and a 'baseball mustache', so-called because it has nine hairs on each side. My airs and manners are those of a silly-ass boy from Back Bay.¹⁸⁵

My dismayed father marches me into a barbershop. He points at the absurd mustache, tells the barber, "Off!" The barber takes off the tuft with two strokes, one to a side. Steamboat Bill gets me a man's hat to replace the beret.

Now this is as much as Chuck Reisner needed to tell me about the story for me to buy it. With this for a start, all we needed to get the story rolling and churning was a wealthy menace with a pretty daughter. The menace has a modern river steamer that will ruin the business my father has done for years on the river with his old-fashioned back-wheeler.

Steamboat Bill I liked very much.

The original story I had was about the Mississippi, but the location we had chosen was on the bank of the Sacramento River opposite Sacramento, some six hundred miles north of Los Angeles.

We went up there and built that street front, three blocks of it, and built the piers and so on. We found the river boats right there in Sacramento: one was brand new, and we were able to age the other one up to make it look as though it was ready to fall apart.

The story continued this way:

Despite the stern disapproval of both of our fathers the girl and I manage to meet secretly. When my father finds out about that it is the last straw. He orders me to go back to Boston, Massachusetts. Sorrowfully I put on my beret and plus fours, pick up my luggage, and go to the station. But as my train comes in I see my father being

¹⁸⁵[Back Bay is a fashionable neighborhood in Boston, fronting the Charles River. K.H.]

arrested. He is taken to the local jail, a log cabin which contains only two cells and the jailers office.

Determined to rescue him, I let the train go and put on my rough working clothes again. In the cabin of my father's boat I hollow out a big loaf of bread and conceal in the hole hammers, saws, monkey wrenches, screwdrivers, and other tools. It is raining like mad as I go to the jail. Even the loaf of bread gets wet. My father wants no part of me. But when the jailer's back is turned I point to the bread and make sawing and chiseling motions.

Meanwhile the soaked bread is expanding and sagging toward the ground under the weight of the escape tools. Then it falls apart and the hammer, screwdrivers, files, and monkey wrenches all clatter to the floor. The outraged jailer throws me into the other cell.

The escape and the flood we planned were peppered with the natural gags I'd known we'd develop.

An unusual thing happened during the making of that picture. My so-called producer on that film was Joe Schenck, who at that time was producing Norma Talmadge, Constance Talmadge and myself, and who later became president of United Artists. Then later on 20th Century Fox was Joe Schenck, and his brother Nicholas Schenck was head man of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Schenck was supposed to be my producer but he never knew when or what I was shooting. He just turned me loose.

One of Joe Schenck's aides, Harry Brand, the publicity man on Steamboat Bill, goes to Schenck and he says:

"He can't do a flood sequence because we have floods every year and too many people are lost. It's too painful to get laughs with. You'll make a lot of enemies for this picture if you keep the flood in it." he told Joe. And he talked him into the idea that a flood would be a ruinous thing to have in a movie comedy.

So Schenck told me,

"You can't do a flood. Too many people have lost their dear ones in recent floods. They will resent us making a joke out of such a disaster." I said,

"That's funny, since it seems to me that Chaplin, during World War One, made a picture called 'Shoulder Arms', a picture making fun of the war and everything connected with it. You can't get a bigger disaster than that, and yet he made his biggest laughing picture out of it." (It was the biggest money maker he'd made at that time.)

"Nobody objected to it. And that includes the gold-star mothers who lost their sons in the war." He said,

"Oh, that's different." I don't know why it was different. But for once the easygoing Joe Schenck was adamant.

When I became convinced he wouldn't change his mind I asked Fred Gabourie, my technical director, how much it would cost to remake our \$100,000 worth of elaborate street sets if we had a hurricane instead of a flood in the picture, I had a hunch that Schenck might not object to a hurricane. Gabourie, a whiz at his job, said \$35,000. It turned out that the changes we made cost slightly less than that.

And Schenck had no objections to my staging a hurricane. I says,

"I've already built my sets, and our gags are worked out. All I can do is change it to a cyclone, which'll take a lot of re-building." He says,

"Well that's better, do that."

It had occurred to me that there were usually many more people killed each year in the United States by hurricanes and tornadoes and cyclones than by floods. But it was all right as long as he didn't find that out, and so I went ahead with Gabourie and did the cyclone.

It cost us easily forty thousand dollars, actually, counting the lost time. Sets to be rebuilt, gags and sequences to be re-planned, wind machines to haul up from Hollywood.

Though my original situation in that film was a flood, a twister could cause the same sort of destruction. Either of them could do many things our script called for: blow buildings into the river, fill the little town jail with water almost up to the ceiling, and sink the sleek craft owned by the heavy, my girl's father.

Far more difficult than remaking the sets was the job of refashioning our gags.

The best new gag we invented involved a breakaway hospital. We used a 120-foot crane set on a barge to pick up this whole structure, leaving only the floor.

Just for fun, when the picture was over, I called the United States Weather Bureau in Los Angeles and asked for figures for the preceding year. I was told that in 1925 there were 796 persons killed in great windstorms and only 36 in floods. But I never mentioned that to Schenck, not wishing to rub it in. I usually could make Joe laugh, but I doubted that he would be amused to hear about the \$35,000 mistake he had made.

The release of Steamboat Bill Jr. was delayed until late following spring as a result of the change from flood to cyclone, making fall 1927 the first theatrical season without a new Keaton film.

Did Buster ever mention how he got on personally with Ernest Torrence?

Oh, he was crazy about him, they got along so well making Steamboat Bill Jr. He's a wonderful actor. He was generally, well you could see that he was generally a villain and heavy heavy character man, but usually a villain, and you could see it in the film, in the beginning when he hated Buster so much (laughs).

I've had plenty of thrills, but one of the greatest was during the production of Steamboat Bill, Jr. in which we filmed a cyclone scene. I figured out a thrilling stunt. I would be standing in the street when the windstorm hit a two-storey building behind me, causing the whole front of it to fall over on top of me. I don't get killed, because there happens to be an open window in the part of the house that lands where I am. We had an engineer work out the details as to the spot in which I would be standing so that I would be 'hit' by an open second-storey window, and remain there unhurt and unconcerned as the rest of the structure was demolished. I was mad at the time, or I would never have done the thing. The 'set' weighed 4,000 pounds.**

He had been arbitrarily turned over to MGM, he was having problems at home, and one thing and another, and he had reached the point where he really didn't care that much.

First I had them build the framework of this building and make sure that the hinges were all firm and solid. It was a building with a tall V-shaped roof, so that we could make this window up in the roof exceptionally high. An average second storey window would be about 12 feet, but we're up about 18 feet. Then you lay this framework down on the ground, mark that ground out and drive big nails where my two heels are going to be, and build the window of the house round me.

We built the window so that when the house came down it was just big enough to give me two inches clearance on either side of each shoulder, and the top missed my head by two inches, and the bottom my heels by two inches. And the front of the

building- I'm not kidding- weighed two tons.**¹⁸⁶It had to be built heavy and rigid in order not to bend or twist in that wind.

The whole gang except Gabe fought me on that one. Bruckman threatened to quit. "You can't do it."

But Gabourie and I figured out all the details. We knew it would work.

Then you put that house back up in position while they finish building it. They put the front on, painted it, and made the jagged edge where it tore away from the main building; and then we went in and fixed the interiors so that you're looking at a house that the front has blown off.

Then we put up our wind machines... Working in front of those wind machines is tough- I took a pretty good beating in Steamboat Bill. We used six of those old Liberty airplane engines to make the wind, and it really blew.¹⁸⁷ One of them- in the course of a shot of running a truck full of paper boxes- about the size of shoe boxes- between me and the camera, that wind just emptied all the shoe boxes off onto me- just for one shot. We took a truck past there once and that one machine blew it off the bank, and rolled it into the Sacramento River. That's how powerful those wind machines are.

Now we had to make sure that we were getting our foreground and background wind effect, but that no current ever hit the front of that building when it started to fall, because if the wind warps her she's not going to fall where we want her, and I'm standing right out in front.

Camera-men, electricians and extras prayed as we shot that scene, and I don't mind saying I did a little praying myself, as I stood in the studio street waiting for the crash. My director, Chuck Reisner, stayed in his tent reading Science and Health.

I drove a couple of tenpenny nails in the ground to mark the place where I had to stand, and I can tell you one thing- when the house started falling, I didn't sway.

The open window 'hit' me, as Gabourie said it would, and it was a great scene. But it's a one-take scene and we got it that way. You don't do those things twice. Two extra women on the sidelines fainted, and the camera-men turned their backs as they ground out the film, first time I ever saw a cameraman look the other way. Everybody on the set was frightened, but I never had any reports that any women who saw the picture in motion picture houses fainted, so I guess the scene wasn't worth the risk. That's a funny thing about stunts. You never can tell just how an audience will receive one. Very frequently a scene that I think is a sure-fire laugh won't even get a giggle.

Dean Reisner, [son of Charles Reisner]: "And then they had that famous scene where Buster is standing in the street and the whole front of a building comes off and crashes down, and he's standing right under it. One of the most spectacular stunts ever done. Of course it's very dangerous. The whole front of the building was on a baseplate, and on hinges; it must have weighed a thousand pounds, the damn thing, and if Buster was six inches out of position one way or

¹⁸⁶[** Is 4,000 pounds the same as two tons? If a hundredweight weighs 100 pounds, & there are 20 hundredweight to the ton, then 4,000 pounds equals two tons. Easy, right? Wrong. Apparently there are Long tons, Short tons, Troy tons, and heaven knows what tons. But 2,240 pounds equals one Imperial Ton, and also, 2,240 pounds equals one Long Ton. Therefore, Buster's estimation both times should be:- 'It weighed 4,480 pounds, assuming it weighed two (Long or Imperial) tons.' or: 'It weighed 4,000 pounds or 480 pounds under two tons.' Close enough to suggest it must have weighed about two tons. To put it in the vernacular: 'The unprintable bleep thing weighed an expletive-deleted ton.' Therefore between the son of Reisner's "a thousand pounds", and Eleanor's "three ton" the margin of error favours Eleanor's "three ton" as Buster would, in my opinion, normally somewhat undercut the element of risk when talking publicly, but also, in my opinion, would not have dared bend the truth whatsoever in the hearing of Eleanor. Would that Gabourie had written his life story.]

¹⁸⁷[400 Horse Power. Arguably the most reliable airplane motor of WW1.]



the other they would have driven him right into the ground like a little tent-peg, y'know, poor Buster was gone; and my Father who was a very religious man, he had a lot of different religions, but at this time he happened to be a christian scientist, and he had a practitioner up there, and they were praying all day, because here comes this shot, y'know, and my father couldn't bear to see it, and he and the practitioner were off praying in one corner and waiting to find out whether Buster came through it or not. (Laughs) He's a game little guy, that Buster."

The only story I ever remember hearing about Elgin Lessley was in Steamboat Bill Jr. It was the Sacramento River up in Northern California and the camera was set up right on the edge of the river for the wall coming down, and the hurricane, big heavy wall. They were still using hand grind cameras in those days, they didn't have the electric. And when that wall came down it was so powerful and so forceful it blew him and Louise, Louise was standing there by the camera and I don't know, maybe others, it blew them straight back into the river, (laughs) the force of the wind of that wall coming down, that wall weighed three ton, and when it came down they went right into the river.

So how come the camera kept going?

I don't know, maybe there was a cut there. I don't know, that's what I was told, that him and Louise went into the river. Louise told me. They probably had two or three cameras on the scene.

His sister doubled Peanuts for all of those things. Peanuts Byron was the leading lady, Marion Byron was it? Anyway Louise doubled her for where he's swinging on the rope and she's hanging on his back and all of that. Where he's swinging from one boat to the other, that was all Louise. Her top weight was about 97 pounds.

Reisner said,

"Buster, I want you smiling as you swim into camera with the minister." I says,

"Oh no you don't." Reisner insists,

"It's a natural gag." and wouldn't give up.

Finally I say,

"All right, but we'll shoot it both ways, then preview with the smile."

The audience groaned. Even the ashcan groaned when we dumped it there.

From One Week in 1920 until Steamboat Bill Jr. in 1927 I made my own pictures, had my own company, and got a percentage of the profits. I made a total of ten feature-length productions and then, in 1927 joined the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer company on a straight salary basis.

It seems to me that Joe Schenck shafted Buster, insofar as Joe Schenck was a much better businessman than to advise Buster to lose the copyright to all his movies, which is essentially what he did.

Well, he didn't necessarily advise Buster to do anything like that. But none of them, Buster, none of them, ever realised that the films would be any good beyond, say, a year and a half, and by then you would have made one or two more.

But Buster was about the only one who didn't own his own movies. Lloyd and Chaplin did...

...But they owned their own studios. Buster was the only one that had a producer. Buster was quite happy with the money he made, and everything else. He had had 35% of everything.

That's the other thing that seems very odd, that if Dardis's stuff about money is in any way..

I wouldn't rely on that.

But he claims it comes from the books of the Buster Keaton studios.

I don't believe it. I've never believed it.

But basically Joe let Buster down, as business advice.

Well, being in a family situation, being married to Norma as well, he was more prone to listen to the ladies side of everything. If the ladies of the family were telling tales, doing all this and that and the other thing... if Joe Schenck hadn't been part of the family and was strictly a business partner at the studio, he would never have heard most of these long sad stories and it would have been more straightforward. He wouldn't trust Buster to have a lot of money on his own because of the fact that Buster didn't feel he was educated enough to do this, and he relied totally on Joe, and told Joe to do it. He wanted Joe to take charge of everything, same as with me. The thing is that Buster had no self-confidence in himself about handling money, and if Joe Schenck misappropriated, well he didn't do that, but anything he might have done, Buster wouldn't have cared. He trusted Joe to do whatever. I know Buster always loved him dearly, so there must have been something *good* about him.

I remember we had trouble one summer. Standard Lab had all our negatives and handled all our work from the studio. And durin' the heat of one of our severest summers, the cooling system went out and all of those negatives just fell apart. The emulsion just ran right off of 'em with that heat. So we lost pretty near all our negatives. So the only thing that would be in existence would be what prints were out and hadn't been run to death and all chewed up...



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN.

Hell, I was sitting pretty and didn't have enough sense to know it.

Everybody had to get their foot in the pie.

1928. MGM. The Cameraman. Elmer. Reverse English...

Then, in 1928, I made the worst mistake of my career. Against my better judgement I let Joe Schenck talk me into giving up my own studio to make pictures at the booming Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lot in Culver City.¹⁸⁸ Even then it was the Studio of Stars and had under contract John Gilbert, Marion Davies, Wallace Beery, Lon Chaney, Lionel Barrymore, William Haines, and Greta Garbo. Marie Dressler, the greatest comedienne I ever saw (until Lucille Ball appeared) was also under contract there but only as a featured player.

From the start I was against making the switch to M-G-M. It seemed to me I would be lost making pictures in such a big studio. When Joe continued to argue for it, I asked Charlie Chaplin what he thought. Chaplin said to me, "What's this I hear? Don't let them do it to you, Buster." He said, "It's not that they haven't smart showmen there. They have some of the country's best. But there are too many of them, and they'll all try to tell you how to make your comedies. They'll ruin you helping you. They'll warp your judgement. You'll get tired arguing for things you know are right. It will simply be one more case of too many cooks." I knew Charlie was levelling. Worse, I knew he was right.

Harold Lloyd said it, only in different words.

"It's not your gang. You'll lose."

Both Charlie and he had retained their own units. Their pictures were first-rate and were coining money.

But Joe Schenck kept saying I would be happy at M-G-M.

"I'm just turning you over to my brother Nick," he told me. They made a big deal out of it, but actually for Joe to hand me over to Nick was about like transferring change from one pocket to another.

"He'll take care of anything you want. As you know, Buster, my brother and I have been partners in every deal either of us ever made. It will be the same as though you were still working for me."

"You mean I have no choice?" I asked.

Joe smiled and shrugged.

In the end I gave in. Joe Schenck had never steered me wrong in his life until then. I do not think he meant to that time either. But letting him override my own instinctive judgement was stupid. As I have said, it turned out to be the worst mistake I ever made.

Well, the thing is, he didn't own his own company, he didn't have enough money to start his own company, and possibly had a contract that he couldn't break anyway, I don't know.

Sam Marx, Story editor at MGM: "Mr. (Nick) Schenck took me on a little tour of this marvellous estate that he now owned at Sands Point, Long Island, and we walked among the chicken coops that he had, there were a number of them, and he had a lot of very valuable chickens, and it

¹⁸⁸[Until this point we have vicariously been living the life of a success and a star, a story altogether too good to be true, even though it is. The editor makes no apologies for not being allowed to rewrite history, much as he would like to. There is a success story contained hereafter [previously ignored] but it is of a totally different nature to the foregoing, it is not financial, it is personal. Further, the nature of the evidence becomes more widely varied as Buster was asked little about much of it.]

seemed that they had all been in great fights with each other, and here among these white-feathered little chickens you saw terrible bloodied bodies. And of course it had an impression on me, here's the president of the company (MGM) telling me..
"Marx, take a lesson from that, it's only the tough chicken that survives. You've gotta be prepared to *kill* the other man if necessary." And that must have been Mr. Schenck's philosophy."¹⁸⁹

So many times I've thought it over. Hell, I knew I was a money-maker. And not a big spender. My pix only cost a couple of hundred grand- Fairbanks couldn't make one under a million. It wasn't that.

I thought of this: Joe Schenck was still an independent. I don't know if it was human nature; greed, or power, but the big companies were out to kill the independents. Motion pictures were becoming the finest trust¹⁹⁰ you ever saw. So I thought, Perhaps they're after Schenck. He was too big to knock down, but maybe his brother Nick at MGM said, 'Look, Joe, it's hurting the business.' Could be. In fact, within two more years Joe left United Artists and quit independent production entirely. Norma and Constance Talmadge didn't succeed in sound pix. Joe went on and became head of Twentieth Century Fox. But if that was his real reason, why didn't he tell me? We were friends.

That seems to be the crux...

That's part of the thing that I never understood, because *everybody* figured Buster had been screwed royally, all his friends and everybody else, and in a way I felt like that from hearing them talk about it. Of course, I wasn't around any of that at the time. And I never could quite figure why he still loved Joe. Later on Joe had strokes, he was not able to get out or anything like that, Buster used to go up and visit him and sit with him. He always looked towards Joe as a second father, and I guess you can have spats with your father but still love him, and I guess that was his attitude. But after we were married, Buster'd say, "I'm going up and see Joe for a while." He'd get in the car and drive up there to see him, sit with him a couple of hours, he didn't get out and around at all.

One thing: I had only one picture in 1927, with the delay caused by Brand on Steamboat Bill, Jr. Also, Joe's own United Artists gummed up it's release. Let it out only to their few theaters and took the shine off. Then the other big theaters wouldn't touch it, and it went straight to down to the neighbourhood houses. That may easily have cost us three-quarters of a million. But Joe Schenck was always a reasonable man. Would he blame me for that?

But there it was: me for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Just like the draft. Everyone seemed to know that it had happened. So I thought, I'll shoot for a miracle. I was so impressed by what Chaplin and Lloyd said that I dashed to New York to see Adolph Zukor, head of Paramount. I asked Zukor if he would be interested in releasing my pictures.

"I want to make pictures for you." I said, explaining that I was free. I explained that I wanted to make them in my own studio. Zukor looked at me and just shook his head. But he wasn't fooling me. Zukor was interested, all right. But on his desk, as we talked, lay a directive from Will Hays, the movie czar, which said, 'Buster Keaton is the exclusive property of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.'

¹⁸⁹[Samuel Marx. Author of 'Mayer and Thalberg the make-believe saints.' 1975.]

¹⁹⁰[monopoly]

He said that he- Paramount- had signed Harold Lloyd. He wouldn't cut the ground out from under his new star. He explained that he had just completed arrangements to release Lloyd's pictures and that having two comedians on Paramount's list made no sense. I thought to myself, What kind of sense does that make? What the hell- Chaplin and I have both been releasing with United Artists. But there was no talking him out of it: I left by the same door I came in by: Keaton goes to MGM.

I went back to my hotel room to think it over and began brooding instead. I got myself thoroughly mixed up, and then I made a mistake, just like in my comedies when I do just one little thing wrong and from then on I'm in the soup up to my neck. Here I decide to ride all my winnings on one throw of the dice- I went to see Nicholas Schenck! I was flustered. It was all too much like my own scripts. I should have sat down and thought everything over. I should have just waited, whether I thought or not. Let people come to me. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer plus Will Hays plus Joe Schenck couldn't have made me do something I never signed to do. I was successful, I was famous, I was free. Hell, I was sitting pretty and didn't have enough sense to know it.

This was all before the stock-market crash. There was money everywhere. I should have gone out for some of it, found backing, kept my gang together, and gone on about my business. There was no law against my making pictures, and I would have got distribution, all right. Because the public wanted me. If the public wants you, there's always a way. And I would have been doing what Chaplin had been doing: making money myself instead of a salary. I'm sure that's what they figured me to do.

But, instead, I went out, had three drinks, and called on Nick Schenck all softened up. Walk in and lead with my right.

"What is this thing, am I with MGM?"

"That's right," he says. "Your studio is a little place; our big new plant will give you bigger production, relieve you of producing. You just have to be funny. We got great writers and directors out there. The best. Experts. Don't worry, be happy." Then he says,

"Now, money. Three thousand a week and percentage."

"No percentage." I say. I know from nothing about their bookkeeping. "If I go with you I want bonuses."

"Bonuses it is. Should we argue?" says Nick Schenck.

"And five thousand a week." I say.

"Three thousand."

"No, four thousand." Nick Schenck just smiled.

"Three thousand a week is just right," he said. "And now we go to lunch."

The contract stipulated Buster was not to be paid if for any reason whatever he was 'out' for more than six consecutive days, or for more than 21 days in any year. Also, Buster was to 'be consulted as to story and direction but the decision of the producer shall be final.'

Buster Collier: "I think Buster became an alcoholic because he was very disappointed inwardly of the way his career was being passed around."

As I mentioned, the biggest mistake I made in my career was leaving my own studio and going to MGM. Chaplin warned me, so did Lloyd- but Joe Schenck talked me into it. And it wasn't that they didn't try, but those types of pictures and those little independent companies working- you could do better. There was an old-fashioned expression that explains the whole thing- too many cooks. When they turned me loose at MGM, they gave me the entire scenario department- there must have been 300- all the brass turned gag men for me- and just too much help. And I guess it's silly to say, but it is a fact, they warp your judgement in the role you're working.

[Thalberg assigned as producer.]

"Look," he said, "you don't need a producer, Buster. But we have to go through the motions to satisfy the front office. I'm assigning you to Larry Weingarten. A nice boy. Just married my sister. But I'll look out for you, you're my pet."

Eddie Mannix: "Thalberg was a sweet guy but he could piss ice water," quoted by Sam Marx.

Thalberg to Weingarten on assigning him to Buster's movies:

"Look, Larry, Keaton doesn't really need a producer. Just do the office work and take the screen credit."

Sam Marx: "Larry Weingarten... was a little more of a sophisticated producer of comedies. But I think he was lost in the Buster Keaton pictures."¹⁹¹

He rushed on the set, overseeing the works. Rode the writers, rode the director, rode me."

Eddie Mannix had been, I believe, a bouncer, and he'd always worked for the Schencks, mostly Nicholas, not Joe. He was never at Buster's studio, but they were friends socially.

It struck me as odd that someone who started off as an enforcer...

Yuh.

...that he should become such a big noise at MGM and stay there for so long?

I never was able to figure out exactly what his job was except that he was put there by Nicholas Schenck. Actually he probably was Nick's spy, because Nick always worked out of New York, and Eddie Mannix probably was in on the know of everything that happened and reported to Nick.

Garson Kanin: 'When I first met him [Eddie Mannix], he was a solid, immovable fixture in the MGM front office. I liked him. He was extremely tough but eminently fair. He said what he thought to everyone, including Nicholas Schenck and L.B.Mayer. He once expressed himself as troubled about the human situation. "You know," he said to me, "I went around the world last year. And you want to know something? It hates each other!" '

Samuel Marx: 'No outsider could get on the lot without a pass, but some merchants were permitted daily entry by Eddie Mannix. They were the talent agents, bootlegger, bookmaker, vendors of fifty-yard-line seats for the college-football season, favored jewellers and custom tailors. These were in addition to the official count of one hundred and seventeen professions practiced in the course of making the studio's program of movies. A Western Union telegraph operation was on the ground floor of the front-office building. Vital to productions, it was also a center of studio espionage. Copies of all messages, coming and going, were delivered to Mannix at the close of the day. As it was illegal, senders and recipients never knew. Mannix guarded his secrets, but workers were often astounded by the clairvoyance the general manager showed in their personal affairs.'

¹⁹¹[Mr. Marx's book, as opposed to these interview snippets, is lamentably inaccurate on the subject of Buster. He has Keaton and Weingarten clashing in 1926-7, instead of 1928-9; and he has Buster being fired in 1929, instead of 1932-3. Go figure. Actually one explanation does offer itself. Marx joined MGM in May, 1930. By dating Buster's tenure at MGM before his own, he avoids dealing with any involvement he might have had in the debacle. This seems especially likely as he fails to mention any Jimmy Durante film until after 1933.]

SEPTEMBER. THE CAMERAMAN. MGM.

When I went over to M-G-M I was again assured that every effort would be made to let me continue working with my team whenever possible. It turned out to be possible very seldom. I do not think that this was anyone's fault. Usually, when I needed the old gang, one of them would be busy on a Norma Shearer picture, another on a Lon Chaney picture, and so on. M-G-M even stole Fred Gabourie, my technical director, from me after I made just one picture on the lot. Before long he was head of the studio's whole technical department, a job he kept until he died.

This was all very flattering to my judgment, or perhaps I should say luck, in selecting superior men for my team. But it did not help me make pictures of the quality I had been able to turn out on my own lot.

The worst shock was discovering what I was up against when we started talking story for the first picture I was to do at M-G-M. I found out I could not work up stories the way I'd been doing, starting only with the germ of an idea. I learned that when I brought Irving Thalberg my first idea for a Buster Keaton comedy.

Now Irving Thalberg was only twenty-nine then, four years younger than I, but already he had shown that he had the keenest appreciation of story values, both comic and tragic, of any executive in Hollywood.

"Sit down, Buster, So what's new?"

"A story.."

"Good."

Now it always helps, in telling a story to a film producer, if you have some particular actor in mind for a key role. It enables your listener to visualize the story more clearly as you tell it. So I started off by saying that I had the perfect woman for the lead, adding,

"She is working right here on your lot."

"Who is that?" he asked.

"I want to team with Marie Dressler." I told him. "You know I had great luck with Ernest Torrence in Steamboat Bill Jr. This would be the same kind of thing."

"Go on."

"Well, we start in Dodge City with a wagon train, Marie Dressler's going alone in her own wagon, when she gets the word that I- her nephew- am showing up."

The story itself was pretty much of a switch on Steamboat Bill, Jr., except that Marie, as a rugged old aunt, would be playing opposite me instead of Ernest Torrence. The background was Fort Dodge shortly after the Civil War. A wagon train is about to leave for the West. In the rocker on the porch of her little shanty sits Marie Dressler. She is all ready and packed to go along. Before her house is a covered wagon, smaller than the others and drawn by one horse. Her mule is also saddled for the trip, and she has a milk cow in the stable which she also intends to take along.

As she rocks she takes out a letter from her purse and reads it. It is from her sister back East who begs Marie not to leave with the wagon train as it is too dangerous an undertaking for a lone defenseless woman. The sister is therefore sending her son, Ronald, to join her. He will arrive on May 18. This is the day, and Marie goes down to the station to meet the train, but Ronald is not on it. When asked by an old friend whether she is going along with the wagon-train party she explains she has to wait for her nephew. He shrugs, and the expedition leaves without her.

She waits- I'm a day late- and the wagon train has gone on. I arrive with the one carpetbag. Then, when she sees me- ouch!- I'm a real nincompoop. I am obviously a



weakling, and the absurdity of a scared-looking little guy like me protecting the husky Marie Dressler from Indians, rapists, or even prairie dogs sets up the audience for a big laugh. I am full of heroic ideas, though, I am sure we can catch up with the wagon train, and I talk her into leaving with me at once. I say,

'Aunty, we can catch them.'

'Think we can?'

'Sure.'

So we set out. Terrible equipment, a horse teamed with a mule, a cow at the end of a rope, and me the world's most incompetent man. While I'm being scared by rabbits she's chopping wood.

When I got to this point, I explained to Thalberg,

"That's all I have as yet. But I'd like to work on it."

"Go on."

"Well, that's your plot."...

.....?

"Well, uh, you know- we fill in. I have to make good for Aunty..."

"It seems to me...."

"There's lots of stuff. Let's see- we fight indians, we ford a river, we get detoured from Oregon by taking a wrong fork in the trail. We, well, we get lost on the desert, a sandstorm obliterates the trail, so we're getting our direction by the sun. Then the indians close in at night- drums, war cries- and we beat it. Off in the dark and into a fog too- we're sure the indians are right on our tail. We come to a river so wide you lose it in the fog, too deep to ford. No time to lose- we fell trees and make a raft. Put everything on it- wagon, horse, cow, mule, belongings, and ourselves- and we take off. A few hundred yards, and the fog lifts- it's dawn, and there we are on the Pacific Ocean! We go ashore and reconnoiter. And, what do you think we find?"

"What do you find?"

"A sleepy little adobe town- we take it from an old print- Los Angeles in 1848!"

He admitted that my story had good points.

"But it's a little frail, Buster. There is really not much to it. It seems insufficient plot for a feature-length picture."

"Insufficient for your writers. They're plot crazy. Me, I can make eight reels out of it. Oh, and look, I want to do it in sound."

He promised to give it some thought.

He was just being polite, of course.

This is the perfect illustration of my point, because Thalberg, as well as being a fine judge of light comedy and farce, also appreciated good slapstick whenever he saw it on the screen. No truck driver ever guffawed louder at my better sight gags than did that fragile, intellectual boy genius.¹⁹²

Nevertheless, he lacked the true low-comedy mind. Like any man who must concern himself with mass production he was seeking a pattern, a format. Slapstick comedy has a format, but it is hard to detect in its early stages unless you are one of those who can create it. The unexpected was our staple product, the unusual our object, and the unique was the ideal we were always hoping to achieve.

Brilliant though he was, Irving Thalberg could not accept the way a comedian like me built his stories. Though it seems an odd thing to say, I believe that he would have been lost working in my little studio. His mind was too orderly for our harum-scarum, catch-as-catch-can, gag-grabbing method. Our way of operating would have seemed

¹⁹²['Although Keaton politely refers to Thalberg as a 'boy genius', Thalbergs 'genius' essentially consisted of turning hack, conventional tripe into shiny, well-decorated tripe.' Gerald Mast.]

hopelessly mad to him. But, believe me, it was the only way. Somehow some of the frenzy and hysteria of our breathless, impromptu comedy building got into our movies and made them exciting.

There was nothing impromptu about the preparations for the first story I actually filmed at M-G-M. This was *The Cameraman*. In this I played a would-be newsreel photographer. William Randolph Hearst was a big stockholder in the company, and somebody had figured out that by using such a character we could legitimately publicize the newsreel company he owned, and in return his newspapers would give the picture an unusual amount of space. I had no objection because the idea also presented wonderful possibilities for good gags.

The Cameraman is one of my pet pictures. It's the simplest story that you can find, which was always a great thing for us if we could find it.

As the story starts I am a tintype photographer down at Battery Park, New York., the sort who makes pictures in a minute or two. Ten cents a picture.¹⁹³ This day I see Gertrude Ederle arrive at the Battery, fresh from her English Channel swim. I join the crowd following her up Broadway to City Hall where Mayor Walker presents Gertrude with the key to the city.

There I saw the Hearst Weekly newsreel-camera unit. And there's a script girl who is working with them, Marceline Day, that I got one look at and fell in love hook line and sinker. I immediately decide to become a newsreel cameraman. I feel sure I can get on the Hearst staff, which will enable me to meet, woo, and win that gorgeous-looking creature.

Well immediately I went down to a pawnshop, and I hock my tintype camera thing to a second-hand dealer for \$6.80, then go home to empty my piggy bank of \$1.80 more. With the \$8.60 I buy¹⁹⁴ a second-hand motion picture camera, and of course I got one of the oldest models there was, one of the first Pathe' cameras ever made. It is so ancient a model that it is cranked from the rear instead of the side. With this equipment I consider myself ready to shoot any and all newsreel subjects.

Well, of course, I set out to be a newsreel cameraman. And of course I had my problems...

When I went to the Hearst office and apply for a job and they got one look at me and my equipment and says, "No." (Laughs intermittently here) Everybody there but Marceline, the receptionist, laughs at me and my camera. Marceline saw me make the attempt and, feeling sorry for me, confides that if I photographed a few news events as a free-lance and brought them in, she would try to sell them to her boss for me. She says, "There's only one way you can do anything. You gotta go out and photograph somethin' of interest. And if they see it and they can use the film you shoot, they'll buy it from you. And if you can do that more than once then they'll put you on as a member of the-"

This is the story point we had reached when the creme de la creme of the M-G-M writing staff began descending on us in droves. Most of these men were very good writers and resourceful plotters, and each naturally wished to contribute something. In all there were twenty-two staff writers helping us. They complicated our simple plot with everything they could think of - gangsters, Salvation Army street bands,

¹⁹³[Tintype, or ferrotype, a method for making direct positive prints in the camera. Photo's are made on a wet collodion emulsion coated on black or chocolate enamelled [japanned] iron plates, and developed in an iron developer. First introduced in 1852 and still popular in the earlier part of the twentieth century with beach and street photographers for while-you-wait photographs. As the original image is turned into a positive, the image is reversed from left to right, a fact not often pointed out to the customer, who would see the image they usually see in any mirror, not the image everyone else sees.]

¹⁹⁴[He hire purchases it in the movie.]

Tammany Hall politicians, longshoremen, and lady gem thieves. Thalberg was in charge of production and he wanted- oh- I wasn't in trouble enough trying to manipulate a camera and photograph current events as a news weekly cameraman.

And it wasn't only the twenty-two writers who were eager to help me out. The executives and the studio big shots also turned into gagmen overnight, adding greatly to the confusion. With so much talk going on, so many conferences, so many brains at work, I began to lose faith for the first time in my own ideas.

Nevertheless, after eight head-busting months we did have a story written down, complete with camera directions for Sedgwick, who had been a top comedy director for years without any such instructions.

At long last we set off for New York to take some background shots. In the party were Sedgwick, Ed Brophy, our unit manager, Marceline Day, myself, and our two cameramen, Elgin Lessley and Reggie Lanning.

In New York and other cities crowds always will hamper your work. But we had figured out how to camouflage to some extent what we were doing. Usually we would hire a big limousine, pull down its side curtains, and shoot with both cameras through the small window in the rear.

The first shot we attempted in New York was one of me, carrying my tintype camera, crossing the trolley tracks at Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street. As I was doing this, the motorman stopped his trolley in the middle of the crossing and yelled, "Hey, Keaton!" His passengers looked out of the windows and also began to shout things at me.

In no time at all I was surrounded by so many people that the nearest cop couldn't even get near me. Quickly the east-west trolleys were backed up for three blocks, also the north-south trolleys on Broadway and the double-decker buses on Fifth Avenue, not to mention the rest of the traffic flowing from six points of the compass.

When I was finally hauled back to the anguished Sedgwick, I pointed out to him the mocking irony of the line in the script describing this scene. It read: 'No one in New York knows that this character exists.'

And when we tried to get a couple of other scenes at the Battery which the script called for, I was again mobbed.

Giving up for the day, we all went back to our suite in the Ambassador Hotel. None of us knew what to do, and in no time at all big Eddie Sedgwick was in bed, taking bromides and yelling for an icepack.

We called Irving Thalberg in Hollywood and told him that we were unable to get the shots the present script called for. We did not have to remind him that so much of the story was built around these shots that without them we'd have no picture.

After both Sedgwick and Ed Brophy discussed this with Thalberg, I got on the telephone. "Like Chaplin and Lloyd, I never worked before with a script written on paper." I said, "And I don't have to now. Now, for God's sake, all I ask is that you authorize me to throw this cockeyed script and shooting schedule in the ashcan, and permit Sedgwick and myself to decide what to shoot from here on. Build the front of the New York City Hall out on Lot Two- we only need the lower floor. I'll shoot backgrounds here and start home in three days."

"Well, okay, Buster. God knows what will happen up front, but go ahead." Thalberg agreed. He had no alternative with us three thousand miles away and burning up more time and money each day.

I told Weingarten.

"We're shooting a half-dozen backgrounds here and then going home."

Weingarten says

"No." I say

"I just talked to Irving."

Given carte blanche, we threw away the written script that had taken eight months to produce. It was as long as 'War and Peace'. I took out forty useless characters and a couple of subplots. These guys didn't realize- they still don't realize- that the best comedies are simple. Give your comedian room to move around in.¹⁹⁵

Well, first of all, the main thing about that they sent the whole company to New York to shoot all the street scenes. And they got there and they had this complicated script, he doesn't even remember what it was all about. They'd never had a script before. They got there and they can't shoot anything. There's no way they can hide him in the streets of New York. So just about the third day of getting nothing they threw the script in the garbage can and started out to make their own movie, they went to Yankee Stadium and did the baseball sequence, five o'clock in the morning they did some street scenes finally, and when they got everything they could get, they packed it in and came back and finished it on the back lot at MGM. And practically nothing in that movie was in that script they sent him East with.

In our version the crack Hearst cameraman became the villain, also my rival for the girl's affections. But the important job we did was simplifying the plot line from beginning to end. Our story also made it possible to shoot all but two of the New York scenes in Hollywood. But to get the two scenes we could only make in New York we waited until Sunday. We also took the precaution of making them in the early morning hours when New York's good people are in church, and her bad people still in bed sleeping off their Saturday night wickedness. One scene was at the Fifth Avenue entrance to Central Park where the old horse-cabs have their stand. The other was in the lobby and on the street in front of the entrance of the Ambassador Hotel. In that scene I rush to the hotel on hearing that an admiral of high rank is leaving the hotel.

First day back in Hollywood

I walked on [the City Hall set], without a care in the world. Automatically I start to work as I have all my life. Started feeling around for bits of business and material. I said,

"I'd like to do something with a drunk and a fat lady and a kid. Get 'em for me."

I was trying for some establishing shots- a couple of laughs- before we hit the plot.

At my studio they would have had the characters I wanted in ten minutes- if they had to go out in the streets and lasso them. But not MGM. You had to requisition a toothpick in triplicate. I just stand there and everybody is hassling. After twenty minutes, Sedgwick said,

"Let's go over to your bungalow a minute, you and I." Over there- we had bungalow dressing rooms at MGM- he said,

"I don't think you did it deliberately, but you made a horse's ass out of me in front of my own company."

I said I hadn't meant to, I didn't know any other way to work, I was sorry, I wouldn't do it again.

"All right," he says, "just so we understand each other."

We go back.

¹⁹⁵[Even so, at 8 reels, it is longer than any previous Keaton Feature excepting only 'The General'.]

"Everybody on the set." he says. I stand and wait. Forty-five minutes later they bring in the fat lady and the little boy. I wait for him to tell me what to do. For a half hour it goes on.

"Do this! No, do that! Shoot this over. Fat lady must you stand in front of Mr. Keaton?"

Finally Sedgwick says,

"Buster, line these goddamn people up and get this _____ shot over with."

"Me?" I ask.

"You." He says. That's when we became friends, Sedgwick and I, and I began calling him Junior."

Harold Goodwin: "We had no sooner started 'The Cameraman' than trouble started. Sedgwick, whom I had made many pictures with, called me aside one day and confided, unbeknownst to Buster, that the front office had called him in. They wanted to know why we weren't following the script. Ed explained that often a situation arose that has comedy potential and Buster liked to milk it for all it is worth. The brass wanted to know how they could budget a show if we didn't follow the script. Some thinking!...Two of the funniest scenes in the picture were the ones where he tried to open his piggy bank and the one where he shares a bathhouse cubicle as he tries to put on a bathing suit. These were not in the script."

There's one unfortunate gap in our print. Apparently the negative had deteriorated. It's the part where you go out for the first day and everything goes wrong. There's just a little bit of that left..

That's a shame because some of the biggest gags are there.

Tell me about what was there.

Well, the number one was I think I saw a lot of people around a Park Avenue hotel and I got there and they says,

"It's the admiral that's coming out!" So I busted through the crowd and a man, whose chest is covered with gold braid, is going through the lobby and into the street, right from the main door into his limousine. In great excitement I film his every step. Only the mistake I made was that I find he is not an admiral. I photographed the hotel doorman. That was my first error.

Then some double exposures my tintype cameraman produced got big laughs in that picture. I got over to the Hudson River and I took newsreel shots of a battleship going down the Hudson, and then also I got a shot of the New York Police Parade on Fifth Avenue, and I double-exposed it by accident. So when I developed my film it showed the battleship sailing down Fifth Avenue and New York's Finest marching bravely down the Hudson River.

Another scene in the Cameraman that movie-goers liked showed me photographing a ship's launching. I went to a launching of some millionaire's new yacht, one of the Vanderbilts. In my eagerness to get the whole thing right I made a mistake, and I set my camera up on part of the cradle which slides the vessel into the water. So as the boat is launched, my camera and I are launched with it.

In a finish I photographed a disappearing gun- one of those great big things that they had come up and shoot. While I'm photographing one, I didn't know it, but I was right up against another one that nearly took the seat of my pants off (laughs).

During other misadventures I picked up an organ-grinders monkey; Josephine. Josephine had been in pictures for years. She enabled an organ-grinder to come in off the streets and retire in comfort.

The sequence which furnished the longest laugh in the picture was found at Venice, California, which we dressed up - or down- to look like New York's Coney Island. Its gags were invented on the spot by Sedgwick, myself, and our two writers, Lew Lipton and Clyde Bruckman. Here is how the sequence went:

Marceline and I arrive at the beach and separate to undress in the bathhouse. The men's section is so crowded that two of us are being put into the same room, which is about three feet wide and three feet deep, making it a tight squeeze for two men. Each bathhouse had six hooks on its walls. We removed four hooks, because a couple of men struggling to hang all of their clothes on one hook apiece could be very funny.

As usual we did not rehearse the scene. As I've said, rehearsed scenes look mechanical on the screen. Sedgwick, who had been an actor before turning to direction, wanted to do the bathhouse sequence with me. But I turned down the suggestion because he was so much bigger than I. I told him that the audience would expect a man of his size to throw me out of the bathhouse if irritated.

What I wanted was a fellow about my size who looked like a grouch but not the sort who dares start a fight. There were dozens of actors in Hollywood who fitted this description, but we were at the beach. That meant it would take hours to find the right one and get him to Venice.

I settled for Ed Brophy, our unit manager. He filled the bill on looks, although he had never done any acting. As it turned out, Brophy did so well that he has been making a first-rate living ever since acting that same irritable, worry-eaten, little character.

In that bathhouse scene we both were in a frenzy to get into our bathing suits and on the beach. Like myself, he was afraid that his girl might catch the eye of a lifeguard or some other husky chap and be picked up before we could get out there.

For our first gag I got my head caught in the suspenders he has just taken off. This as I tried to straighten up after unlacing my shoe. In taking off my tie I catch his elbow. I take off my coat which falls on him. He takes off his shoe and in coming up gets his head between my legs, upending me and sliding me off his shoulder. Meanwhile our clothes keep falling off the hooks on us. When we emerge from the bathhouse I have on a bathing suit four times too big for me while Brophy's is so small it is choking him to death.

The scene ran for four minutes, which is a very long time on the screen for a string of gags worked by just two men in a ridiculous situation. Thalberg almost had hysterics when he saw that day's rushes in a projection room.

(Later in the film) I got mixed up in that Tong War down there [in Chinatown] and because they saw me photographin' they came at me. I didn't seem to have any choice but to just leave my camera and dive out the window into a fire escape and get away from 'em. And then go ahead and round out the story. We previewed it and we thought the last reel was a good reel... and the last reel just died the death of a dog. It dawned on us what that was. I deserted that camera. So I had to go back and re-make that-even with the trouble of tryin' to get away from those wild Chinamen in the Tong War. I still kept my camera. Then it was all right. (Laughs) It was Okay.

Toward the end of the picture I rescued the girl from drowning, deserting my camera to do so, but circumstances enabled my rival to claim credit for this. However, my monkey kept turning the camera crank, and when the film in my camera was shown in the projection room it revealed me as the hero.

In the last scene the girl and I walked up Lower Broadway. She kept telling me how everybody admired me. Suddenly the windows on all floors of the skyscrapers we're passing open, and ticker tape and confetti by the bale are thrown out. Believing the

acclaim is for me, I bow and blow kisses at all my admirers. But the last shot of the picture reveals that the excited welcome is really for a man riding right behind us, a fellow named Lindbergh who had just made a solo flight over the Atlantic Ocean.

This shot, like many others we used of New York in that picture, was taken from newsreel footage made of the actual events. Our work, except for the scenes taken on that one Sunday morning in New York, was all done at the studio or on nearby locations.

Thalberg told me,
"Buster, Mr Mayer and I want you smiling in that last fade-out."
"All right, we'll do it and use it at the preview. If the public likes it, fine. If they don't, we agree that the smiling deal's a dead duck from now on. Okay?"

So I did it to satisfy MGM, and Irving Thalberg especially, who insisted I try it. A big fadeout at the finish of the picture, the girl in my arms or something- a big smile. We previewed the picture, and instead of the audience saying, 'Oh, look, he smiled. Hooray!' the preview audience hated it and hooted the scene, they said, "Oh, the bum smiled." And they actually got mad at me. We went right back to the studio cutting room, took that scene out and put the one in where I didn't smile through the fadeout. After that I never smiled again on stage, screen, or TV.¹⁹⁶

What I couldn't understand was why, after I proved my point, the big wheels at M-G-M would not allow me to have my own unit. I kept pleading,
"Give me Eddie Sedgwick to direct, two or three writers, my own prop man, electrician, wardrobe woman, and a few technicians, and I will guarantee to deliver pictures as good or better than The Cameraman."

I went into great detail about this, particularly with the gentle, soft-spoken, brilliant Thalberg. I tried to show him how much more effectively I could work with a unit of my own.

"My prop man," I pointed out, "knowing how I work, will need few instructions. He can go out and buy whatever I need without my telling him. My cameraman will not stop grinding even if the director says 'Cut!' Knowing how I work, he will keep on because he has seen me take a fall or do something else on the spur of the moment. For instance, a package might accidentally fall off the shelf and give me a new notion. With each man knowing his job, much time and money will be saved. When we are ready to start each new picture the crew will have everything prepared and ready."

Most of the real heavy charges in movies come when you are in production. Any delay- a principal getting sick, bad weather, an accident to the equipment- can cost a fortune. So, once started, the quicker you get your picture finished and in the can the fewer the hazards.

Another obvious difficulty of working with different specialists on each picture was that they often behave like prima donnas. Having less to gain through pleasing me than men on my team would, they are often more interested in getting outstanding results for their speciality, instead of co-operating fully to get the story told in the quickest and best way possible. Not being on a team they rarely forgot that their next assignment depended on their work standing out, instead of being subordinated to the picture as a whole. Under M-G-M's system each craftsman was more beholden to the head of his department than to me.

If they had been part of my regular unit I could have controlled them and kept them working as a team interested chiefly in the production itself. For example, sometimes,

¹⁹⁶[See, *Le Roi De Champs Elysees.*]

if a corner was not perfectly lighted we would not care enough about this to stop the camera, bring in more lighting equipment, and reshoot the scene. But the electrician who worried about being criticized by his chief didn't care how long he delayed us so long as he got his lighting exactly right.

The fact is that no picture ever became a smash hit because of its perfect lighting, wonderful sets, or exceptional camera work. The story was always the thing, with the star next in importance.

Thalberg, Mannix, and Louis B. Mayer all must have understood this. Yet they never did let me have my own unit. That would have lessened their power and control, I know, but only a little. I suppose the real reason was that they feared that if they yielded to me sooner or later every star on the lot would be demanding their own unit.

I've seen it reported that Buster referred to Mayer as "That son-of-a-bitch-Mayer"...

..Buster may possibly have called Mayer a son-of-a-bitch, he may have done so. Buster did not like Louis B. Mayer, and the feeling was mutual. Louis B. Mayer did not like comics of any kind, and they had never had a comic at MGM until Joe Schenck sold Buster over to his brother, Nicholas Schenck, who was head of MGM, and Louis B. Mayer had no choice in the matter. It was established fact, Buster was there, his contract was there, and L. B. Mayer didn't like him. He treated Buster very badly, so naturally Buster didn't like him. He would say whatever....

Buster did a lot of cussing, but never what I would call really dirty, there was no dirty words, no four-letter words, anything like that, ever! And he never talked dirty about anything or anybody. No bath-room humor, no sex humor, nothing like that, ever!

[ref. instructing non-actor to act] ..Don't act. I always told Louis B. Mayer that too, every time they photographed him for one of those weeklies, something like that, I'd say,
"Don't act."

But My God he could act in an office, put on the damndest performances you ever saw. Hysterical, cry, moan, heartbroken, beaten down old man. Especially for the women.

'.. camera tripod in between the closing doors, the guard can't get the doors closed and is forced to open them again, bawling Buster out as he does so. He shoves Buster into the door and gets prodded by Buster's tripod.
Exact business cannot be worked out on paper. Certainly with Buster, a picture camera, and...
in a subway jam, there will be no difficulty..
getting a series of big laughs After several.. ..
the subway train gets started. And we..
continue with some fun inside the subway car.' Fragment of script
THE CAMERAMAN a.k.a 'Snap Shots'.

Shooting began May first, ended June twenty-fifth. Cost \$362,565, about \$50,00 less than Steamboat Bill, Jr. (Dardis.)

Blesh: 'Keaton pointed out the oddest item of all- a stunt check for seven dollars and fifty cents, carefully placed in a frame.'

That was a stunt I did for Lew Cody.

I'm making The Cameraman with Ed Sedgwick and one day we have a hold-up. I figured Sedgwick wouldn't need me for a while, so I'm roaming the other sets.

Lew Cody's in full-dress clothes for a dinner party. He's supposed to come down to the cellar to turn on the boiler or something. The gag was that he comes down in tails, and he steps on a cake of soap.

Well, I got down there and I saw a double do it. Cody can't fall off a chair without putting himself in hospital, so he's got these two stunt men. They each do good falls, but it was a kind of a brutal fall and it wasn't funny. Eddie Sutherland, the director, didn't want a straight dramatic fall- it had to look funny or he can't use the scene.

So I said,

"Hell, I'll do it. Give me Cody's clothes." There were no dressing rooms in those days- you just went behind a piece of scenery and that was it.

So I do the fall. I put on his full-dress suit, came down the steps, and instead of hitting the piece of soap with both legs going from under me, I did it the other way. I took my foot out so it threw me on my head, and as I came down I threw a neck roll and lit with my coat tails over my head, perfect. It hid me completely when I hit..

You cut to Cody and no one knows. All I had to do was to move Cody in there in the exact same spot, move the camera up a few feet, and he just took the coattails back off his head, shook himself, and went up with it. It was an ideal cut.

Now they moved the camera up without putting a number board between the shots. In the projection room, poor Eddie Sutherland is there watching his dailies with Irving Thalberg. When they showed the rushes they didn't have chalk marks between the shots so it looked like it was a continuous scene. Thalberg thought it was Cody.

And Thalberg says,

"You must never let Cody do a thing like that! Do you realize the chance you took? Cody could be laid up for weeks!"

Poor Cody. He couldn't fall off a table without breaking his neck

They gave me a stunt check for seven-fifty. I never cashed it. They owe me an awful lot of interest, because that was shot in 1928! [Probably recorded Dec. 1964]

One day, quite a while after we finished *The Cameraman*, Thalberg asked me, "Now what was the story you wanted to do with Marie Dressler?"

But by then, as a reward for her great performance in *Anna Christie*, Marie was being starred. And at that time no one was using two stars in comedies like mine.

So I had to say,

"It's too late for that story now." And he agreed that nobody but Marie would have been right for that role.

Buster did care for the loss of artistic freedom, which is part of the problem, because he had too many people trying to do too many things for him, that he was better able to do himself.

On being assigned larger bungalow to replace rented one over the street.

Buster: "Oh no, I'm not Marion Davies."

Thalberg: "You're one of our stars."

Buster: "No."

Thalberg: "Mr. Mayer wants you to have it."....

Buster: "Come on Carruthers, pack up the skillet and the cocktail shaker. We're moving."

ELMER

If I was not happy at M-G-M my 170-pound St. Bernard, Elmer, was. Each working day I brought him with me to the studio where he spent his time sunning himself on the porch of the bungalow assigned to me. Because Elmer was always there when I was, we called the bungalow 'Keaton's Kennel'. **Actually his first Elmer came from a hospice in Switzerland, and he was given to Norma when she was over there on a trip, like 1925-26, somewhere back in there, maybe even earlier, and they arrived in New York and Buster and Natalie were there to meet them and they were going to go to the shows and this and that, and then all come back together on the train. And when they got off the boat - the dog was full grown already - they got off the boat and she says, "Here, got a dog for you." Norma didn't want him. They couldn't take him into the hotel or anything, so Buster took him clear down to the Battery, at the bottom of Manhattan Island and rented him a horse stall, where they keep the carriage horses, and they kept him there for three days until they got him organized and got a crate made for him to put him on the train to come home to California. That was his first Saint. Up until then he'd had a pure bred German shepherd named Captain. So the original Elmer was from Switzerland, and he's the one that lived at the studio. He might have had a German name that Buster didn't use.**

Elmer had a very superior canine intelligence. Even our vet agreed to that, and as all dog-lovers know, sincere praise from a vet for any dog is praise indeed.

Early one morning the vet called me at the house.

"Is Elmer back home yet?" he asked. I looked out of the back window and told him Elmer was out there all right.

"The reason I ask," explained the vet, "is that at one o'clock this morning I was awakened by scratching noises on my door. I got up, opened the door, and was astonished to find Elmer. As you know, Buster, the vet's is the last place any dog will come near- if he can help it. The odors of the animal hospital remind him of all the injections and terrible-tasting medicines he was forced to take there.

"What's up, Elmer?" I asked, and he came in limping. On examining him, I found a rose thorn in one of his paws. After extracting it, I opened the door, and he trotted out. After all, I figured that if he was smart enough to find his way here over three miles of road he'd be smart enough to get home. But I called just to make sure."

In the manner of large dogs of aristocratic lineage Elmer was indifferent to the cooings and caresses of members outside the family circle.

Our bungalow was located where the Irving Thalberg Memorial Building now stands, and all of the M-G-M stars, featured players, and big brass walked by daily. Elmer, usually with a yawn, permitted a few of them to pet him. But only for a moment or two, then he would get up and walk away in boredom.

Whenever Garbo was making a picture at M-G-M she had a light lunch in her dressing room, then walked the entire length of the studio, including the back lot where the large outdoor sets were located.

The first three or four times that Elmer saw the immortal Swede stroll by he observed her, I noticed, with unusual interest. One day he got up from his favorite spot on the porch and joined her. Each day after that Elmer would accompany Garbo on her mid-day strolls across the lot and back to the door of her dressing room. But whenever Garbo tried to pet Elmer he drew back and moved away. It was as though he considered such familiarity from a mere walking acquaintance in bad taste.

It went on for years that way, with Garbo loving her volunteer guard and strolling companion but never annoying him with so much as a pat on the jowls. Elmer wasn't looking for love, he wanted prestige.

Elmer did his own shopping. He would look a butcher in the face until the guy couldn't stand it and would throw him a steak, the best in the house, and then charge it to Keaton. Elmer ate three lunches at MGM- the original expense account dog. He lunched at my bungalow at noon, with Marion Davies at one, and with the executives at two.

I wondered if Buster ever mentioned Marion Davies?

Not a lot. She had her bungalow on the lot that Hearst had built for her and everything, and Elmer used to go there for lunch every day. He made the rounds. He would go to Marion Davies for a snack for lunch. He used to take a noonday walk every day with Greta Garbo. He wasn't that fond of her, but he seemed to think she needed a bodyguard, and she wasn't allowed to touch him or pet him, he would take a pace off so she couldn't quite reach him. But he used to take a daily walk at noon every day with her and see that she got back to her dressing room safely. Elmer knew her better than Buster.

Have the talkies plunged films artistically downhill?

Oh, I don't think so. But there's a certain type of people that work like I did, or like any of the people who were so successful during the silent days.

Action. That's what went out when the talkies came in.

It's like vaudeville. In the old days you really had variety: variety of pianists, comics, singers. Then the thing went into decline, and now there are no schools to train those kind of people. It's the same in movies. When talking pictures arrived the edict went around Hollywood- they all have to talk; and they overloaded the scripts with talk, unnecessary talk- it was a novelty.

There'd never have been comics like Bob Hope and [Jack] Benny in the pre-talkie era; the only one who could have fitted in is Red Skelton. And Lupino Lane in England. But with somebody like me, you don't give me a long speech to recite. Let somebody else say it, let somebody else do the explaining.

Until the coming of TV nothing ever rocked Hollywood like the talkie revolution. It all but destroyed the world market for American films. Thousands of the movie theaters in foreign countries were never wired for sound. Most of the great silent stars were also put out of business by the talkie revolution. Women fans were dismayed to learn that John Gilbert, the man of their romantic dreams, had a squeaky voice.¹⁹⁷

Variety: October 30. 1929. WALL STREET LAYS AN EGG.
And on the same page, AUDIENCES LAUGHING AT GILBERT.
Within a month Wall Street collapsed.

They also lost interest in Norma Talmadge, the screen's greatest lady, and scores of other fabulously paid silent stars whose real voices did not fit the personality which the public had imagined was theirs. Warner Brothers in 1926 became the first studio to

¹⁹⁷[There seems to be some debate as to whether Gilbert had a squeaky voice or not, but certainly that is what the fans learned.] ['Q. Was John Gilbert's voice really so bad that he had to quit talkies because of it? A. Definitely not; this is the sort of story that grows and grows because the first time it appeared nobody bothered to refute it. Gilbert's voice wasn't great. But it was good. And it was improving with every picture. He only failed because talkies were no longer making the type of picture that he had specialized in.' Joe Franklin: Classics of the Silent Screen. 1959?]

exploit talking pictures. But it took the other studios several years to accept the unpleasant fact that talkies were not just a fad.

On finally waking up, the other studios tried to make up for lost time by rushing out platoons of Broadway performers who could 'speak' to replace the silent screen stars, starlets, character people, and comics whose careers had been wrecked on the sound track.

The actual fact of getting into sound didn't bother him at all because he had a good baritone voice, no stutter, no lisp, no problem. So the fact of speaking, or singing, or anything like that, no problem, he'd done it all his life.

Was Buster musical, at home?

Buster used to write parodies on other people's music. But they were only good for say, six months and that would be the end of it because new songs were coming out then. Buster didn't do any singing in films unless it was absolutely necessary, but he kept good rhythm, and could enunciate his lyrics enough that he could get by.

The coming of Sound didn't bother me at all. There was only one thing I wanted at all times, and insisted on: that you go ahead and talk in the most natural way in your situations. Don't give me puns. Don't give me jokes. No wisecracks..

You just kept fighting that, see...But in every picture it got tougher.

New York stage directors; New York writers, dialog writers; and musicians union all moved to Hollywood. Everybody at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was in my gag department, including Irving Thalberg. They'd laugh their heads off at dialog written by all your new writers, They were joke-happy. They didn't look for the action, they were looking for funny things to say. So the minute they started laying out a script they're looking for those funny lines, puns, little jokes, anything else. The script writers got an upper hand and action got left out.

Three things are important in films.

Number one is the story.

Number two is the star, the attraction.

Number three is the director.

All the others.... the picture business offered the biggest opportunity to people with no talent. When the talkies came we got filled up with financiers, and men from Tin Pan Alley and so we got cliques. Everyone started getting nervous, and then everyone started getting nervous that other people would notice they were nervous. When W.C. Fields wanted me to read 'Tales of Manhattan'- he just wanted me to read it, that's all- he made me hide the script when I was walking out of the studio so that people wouldn't know.

Trouble is in laying out a story. When you've got spots in there where you can do things in action without dialog, you should take advantage of it. And the average company don't do that.

It was the same as when I started making silent pictures. First instructions with the new writers we were getting from Broadway... see, everything with them was based on a joke, funny saying, people shouting. But we'd tell our story, our plot, with our characters. We talk when necessary, but we don't go out of our way to talk. Let's see how much material can we get where dialog is not needed.

And my fight with Thalberg at MGM was this,...

"Lay out a script with me the same as you always did, 'cause as soon as our plot is set and everything is going smooth, I'm always going to find places in the story where

dialog is not called for. So you get those stretches of six, seven, eight, nine minutes where there isn't a word of dialog." In those, we did our old routines. Then, when it's natural to talk, you talked. You didn't avoid it.

You felt that you could function just as well in sound?

Why, sure. The only thing we did in laying out our material was to deliberately look for action laughs, not dialog laughs. That has always been my fight with the brass. It needn't be one long yak-yak. There were all these writers, and all these writers could think about was funny sayings and puns. I'd try to fight those down.

In the Thirties, if there's a silence, they say there's a dead spot.

There's nothing wrong with sound that a little silence won't cure.

Wrong?

I visualise sound effects. When you fall down and go boom, you really go boom. But leave the wisecracks and the bad puns and the dirty jokes to the burlesque comedians. No one wants Chaplin or me to do much talking. Better we keep our mouths shut. Let the man say, 'Now you go and do this', and then we go about our silent business with sound all around us. You don't go out of your way *not* to talk in a silent film, but you only talk if it's necessary.

Suppose I'm a carpenter's apprentice. It's perfectly natural for me to work with him for hours without saying anything. Suppose the carpenter hits my thumb with his hammer. Suppose I think, 'God damn', and leap out the window. Well, I'm not going to *say* my thumb hurts, am I? That's the trouble with the talkies.

F. You say the worst mistake you made in your life was in moving to Metro. And you suggest the MGM stable of gag writers didn't do you any good. What did happen when you went to Metro?

Too many cooks. Not that there wasn't brains at MGM. Plenty of writers and high salaried men, but too many!

F. How do you mean that?

Well, now here is rule number one with us when we were making our pictures; simplicity in story. And as few characters as possible, too. Well, that was reverse English when I went to MGM. Irving Thalberg was in charge of production and he wanted me involved with gangsters, and then get in trouble with this one and that one, and that was my fight- to eliminate those extra things.

F. Thalberg wanted too much complexity?

Uhuh.

I'll show you what happens to you. Up until say 20 years ago [1938], if I phoned out to the production department at MGM and says,

"I want an insert of a man's hand coming in and picking up a book off of a desk." Now that's not a big lighting job. That's not a big set job. That cost me 20 years ago exactly \$80,00.[?] So today, 20 years later, that same scene would cost almost \$12,000.

Where it didn't cost us (in the early twenties) only the price of the film we bought, which is \$2.68 cents- somethin' like that. That was the difference. So if I don't work to a schedule at MGM I wreck the studio, according to their system. Which of course is the-

Another thing that hurt is that we lose all chance of spontaneity- ad libbing. In other words. Because half of our scenes, for God's sake, we only just talked over. We didn't actually get out there and rehearse 'em. We just walk through it and talk about it. We cranked that first rehearsal. Because anything can happen- and generally did. And we got our best sequences that way.. we used the rehearsal scenes instead of the second take.

With us, we used to say one of the hardest things in the world to do in pictures is to *unrehearse* a scene. In other words, you get so mechanical that nothing seems to flow in a

natural way. Cues are picked up too sharp and people's reactions are just mechanical. Well now to get that feeling out of it is unrehearse the scene, and we generally did that by going out and playing a coupla innings of baseball or somethin'. Come back and someone'd say,

"Now what did I do then?" I'd say,

"I don't know. Do what you think best." and then go ahead and shoot. That's unrehearsing a scene. Coffee break or somethin'...

It's worse today than it was in the silent days because you've got so many technical things such as all your sound equipment. They were pretty strict before on rehearsing scenes until the director thought they were perfect before he'd crank, and especially since sound came in. But a director today [1958] will rehearse people in a scene until he's got it mechanically perfect, and the way he wants it. But in doing it, the scene has become mechanical. The people have become mechanical. They're just walking through it like a parrott. So we used to say in the silent days, if we have to rehearse a scene very many times, one of the worst problems you've got on your hands is to unrehearse it. You get stale on it so to make it look spontaneous, you throw a little pep into it so everything is unexpected and you don't anticipate so much. It was a very important thing with us. So for that reason we used to just practically slowly walk through scenes and just talk them over. I'd never scrap the first actual take because invariably that'd be the scene you'd take even though you did it three or four times afterwards. The first take was generally the one you used. Our people were able to get the basic idea of a scene and take advantage of whatever came up, but comedians aren't brought up that way any more. The minute something goes wrong nowadays, everybody stops cold. While I was on we used to keep cranking....¹⁹⁸

Penelope Gilliatt: 'Buster Keaton once told me that when he and Chaplin first used the new sound cameras what they most missed in them was the noise. The old silent picture cameras made a rhythmic racket that both of them had unconsciously taken for a beat when they were acting.'

Less than a year later¹⁹⁹ I got a chance to buy the sort of boat I'd always wanted at a bargain price. It was a 98-foot ocean-going cruiser with a diesel twin-screw engine, two master bedrooms, three smaller bedrooms, and a lounge which slept four more. It required a crew of five: captain, engineer, cook, steward, and deck hand. One of its two lifeboats had carried a six-cylinder engine. This dream ship had been built for the publisher of the Seattle Times at a cost of \$102,000, but he had used it only once. On its maiden trip his wife and both of his children got terribly seasick, and in disgust he immediately put it up for sale. I got that slim, lovely, ocean-going yacht, which had seen only forty hours of service, for \$25,000 cash. When the deal was set I went up to Seattle and sailed her to San Pedro Harbor- with some assistance from the captain and crew, of course.

That weekend we took a large party of friends on a trip to Catalina Island. Among those on board was my boss, Louis B. Mayer. After looking the craft over, he said, "I don't know what you paid for this boat, Buster, but whatever it was, you can make a \$10,000 profit right now by selling it to me."

We had almost reached Catalina before I realized our two boys weren't aboard.

¹⁹⁸[While it is not possible to calculate what proportion of the approximately 20 hours of film Buster made his own way was the result of happy accident during shooting, it is clear said portion of his output was both important and in many cases, justly famous. See *Three Ages*, *Seven Chances*, *General*, etc.]

¹⁹⁹[Buster probably means less than a year after he moved to MGM.]

"Where are the kids?" I asked Nate. "This would be great for them."

She explained that she had them at a friend's ranch for the weekend.

"I was afraid that they might fall overboard." That seemed absurd to me. Jim and Bob had been given swimming lessons as soon as they could walk. And I told my wife that the idea of them having any such accident with the crowd we had aboard was ridiculous.

Hedda Hopper: 'Outside our city limits, its society, with few exceptions, doesn't mean much, primarily because our standard isn't 'Who are you?' but 'How much have you got?' ' Do you think that's true?

Yes, it's true. When it went from silent pictures to sound pictures it became a money situation. How much you made was which category of friends you had.

But before that point Hollywood wasn't like that?

No.





CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT.

What was the use of my fighting with them?

1929-31. Spite Marriage. Hollywood Revue. Free and Easy.
Doughboys. Parlor, Bedroom and Bath. Farce. Vacation.

1929. APRIL. SPITE MARRIAGE.

French version, 'Buster Se Marie.'

Went into production November 19, 1928, finished, December 19.

Cost \$282,215, or \$80,000 less than The Cameraman. [Dardis.]

Buster's leading lady in Spite Marriage was Dorothy Sebastian, who was known as 'Slam-bang Sebastian', 'Little Alabam', or just 'Slam', as a result of her habit of falling down without warning after a few drinks. Considered Buster's best leading lady. (Dardis.)

Slambastian. Buster used to call her Slambastian. I have no idea why.

With reference to the putting-the-drunken-bride-to-bed-scene...

Weingarten says,

"Don't bother to tear that scene down. I don't like that kind of thing in my pictures."

I talked like a Dutch uncle to save that scene; lucky I got it into Weingarten's film.
It was only the biggest laugh in the film.

I'm afraid that Larry Weingarten was plenty sore, especially when the putting-the-bride-to-bed was such a success.

But, God Almighty, I'd fight for the darndest things, that I knew were right, and they'd brush me off.

Andy Nealis, assistant director: "He would do falls, stepping up on a table and falling on his face, My God, you'd think all the bones in his body'd be broken.

"My Goodness," I'd say, "you won't be able to play baseball!" He says "I'm only practising, I'm rehearsing."

Gil Perkins. Stuntman: "Yes, he could do the acrobatic stuff because they knew he was capable of it; No, they wouldn't let him do anything else, if there was anything concerned with horses or automobiles or anything like that, that entailed any danger; they wouldn't let him do that."²⁰⁰

We have two children, Joseph T, seven, and Robert T, five years and six months, and I live in an Italian home on three acres of ground in Beverly Hills. How's that? 1930
Harry T. Brundidge: 'The sad faced pantomimist of the screen, soon to produce his first talking picture, was in a talkie mood as he jumped about his bungalow dressing-room on the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer lot. He was forever on the move, standing up, sitting down, climbing on furniture and laughing.
Keaton is a little fellow, standing only 5 feet, 5 inches and weighing only 140 pounds. He has a pleasing personality, big brown eyes, which are full of fun, and black hair. He is immensely wealthy [ho ho], and supports his father, mother, brother and sister. Harry, his younger brother, is a student at the University of Southern California.[Harry T. Brundidge. Twinkle, Twinkle, Movie Star. 1930.]

Harry Keaton never went to University or College, he finished High School, and from that point on he didn't do much of anything.

²⁰⁰[It is probably as a result of the hair-raising stunts atop the mast of Buster's yacht in Spite Marriage that Buster was henceforth forbidden to do dangerous stunts.]

NOVEMBER. THE HOLLYWOOD REVUE OF 1929.

Molly Haskell: 'Many of the most important stars of the period didn't survive the transition to sound, and our impressions of those who did are based primarily on their work in sound films. The proof of this is that for the longest time- until quite recently, in fact- such supremely talented silent stars as Marion Davies and the sublime Buster Keaton were completely discredited by their sound films, on which their reputations were based.'

But the talkies did not wreck my career. Quite to the contrary. The first talking picture I appeared in was an all-star musical, The Hollywood Revue. It was Metro's first big musical, and they put every star in the studio into it, to do a bit. Everybody at M-G-M who could sing, dance, talk, whistle, or mumble appeared in this one. Look at the stardust-powdered cast: Conrad Nagel, Jack Benny, John Gilbert, Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Bessie Love, Charles King, Lionel Barrymore, Laurel and Hardy, Marie Dressler, Polly Moran, and last, and I hope not least, your Buster and mine.

The hit of that glittering show was Cliff (Ukulele Ike) Edwards's number, 'Singing in the Rain', the song which Gene Kelly repeated with such success just a season or two ago in Les Girls.²⁰¹ The Hollywood Revue was a wallop hit.

Gossip item in Photoplay. Sept, 1929: 'Here's the ultimate. There can't be anything more to add to pictures. MGM has now introduced the smell-a-tone. At the opening of 'The Hollywood Revue of 1929' at Graumans Chinese Theater the audience thought the orange blossom finale was so realistic that they could actually smell orange blossoms. Well, they could. A gallon or so of perfume was put in the ventilators when the finale flashed on the screen.'

1930. MARCH. FREE AND EASY.

French and Spanish versions.

New York Times.25/March/1929. Mordaunt Hall: 'Buster Keaton talks. In an extravaganza, with some violently funny episodes and others that are only mildly amusing, Buster Keaton, the silent stoic of other days, joins the ranks of the talking screen players and it is a pleasure to report that his voice in this vehicle, known as 'Free and Easy', thoroughly suits his unique personality. His audible performance is just as funny as his antics in mute offerings. Often, in this current contribution, there are episodes of silence in which Mr. Keaton takes full advantage as a farcical adventurer....'

And Free and Easy, the first talkie I starred in, was among the company's biggest money-makers of the year.

They'd have six, eight, ten writers on it, and everybody had to put their foot in the pie, and it just got to the point where he couldn't get any work done that he thought was quality because there was too many people interfering.

They were picking stories and material without consulting me and I couldn't argue them out of it. I'd only argue about it so far, and then, let it go. When I found out that they could write stories and material better than I could anyway,²⁰² what was the use of my fighting with them?

[Editors warning. the following contains a number of historical untruths, marked thus*]

²⁰¹[This original version is performed at nearly twice the tempo of the later, now immortal, hit version.]

²⁰²[He means that said stories, which he despised, were profitable..]



Lawrence Weingarten: "He could have gone on his own, nobody asked him to sign the contract at Metro*.... Don't you see, he was a child*, with the mentality of a child*. He had no other world as far as I know....

When he came to us he had been working for Joseph M. Schenck in the early days of 'The General' and 'The Navigator', and then his popularity started to wane*, and Mr. Schenck was trying to find some way to get rid.... of some of the contract.... So we took the contract. Now by this time poor Buster was pretty well broke*.

He'd made a lot of money, he'd married.... Natalie Talmadge, and was drinking pretty heavily... in any event, he was evidently very unhappy*, depressed*, we had quite a problem with him*.

We had problems with all actors, didn't matter whether it was his drinking, or other types of temperament; I didn't mind that.

I was terribly fond of him. He was a darling man. But we had troubles. We would find him someplace*.

He had as many people around him... There weren't as many people to see, but there were... as many people involved in Joe Schenck's... he had a director and writers. He had just as much leeway with us*.

Only in a big studio they were paying him his salary and they had to make a number of pictures over a number of years, that was the problem, that was always the problem with the star system*.²⁰³

They paid large salaries and they had to make X number of pictures. We had to find material*, try to find material.

The writers, the director, myself, and Buster, that's how we worked*. Sometimes we'd have a couple of gag men*. We had Al Boasberg on a couple of those pictures.... there was Ralph Spence and Bob Hopkins and Lew Lipton...

And for the talkies, he couldn't talk*. We had a very difficult time, because there were no inflections*.... Then there was Charlie Chaplin who couldn't make the... times had changed, they were all from the same school. If anything we kept him [Keaton] alive longer than they were alive*. Harold Lloyd went out of the picture immediately*.

Some of these pictures did much more than his original silent pictures,²⁰⁴ but he was a victim of change. He accused the studio of his gradual demise*, but Harold Lloyd had his own studio and he left the picture, went down the drain*...

But I'm sure he was a victim of his times. He didn't have as much as Chaplin, or even Lloyd in speaking*. There were no intonations*.

As you remember, when he spoke, he spoke in a flat monotone*...

that was a part of his physical action, that monotone, the blank face...

Sound comedy is a different thing entirely*. Sound comedy is about what people say, mostly, not what they do*. We tried to combine both*.... (Dardis.) [As you can see, Mr. Weingarten is a seriously flawed witness.]

Buster Collier: "Buster felt that anytime he wanted to pull himself together, he could do it... even if it took thirty days. The hangovers, that's what really did him in. Buster never really thought he'd get any older..."

Birds can be completely unco-operative. In 1928, when Twentieth Century-Fox was making one of its first sound pictures, a rebellious rooster cost the company \$50,000.

All Hobart Henley, the director of the picture, wanted this rooster to do was crow at daybreak, exactly as he did every morning. With sound itself still a novelty on the screen, any sort of familiar noise, bellow, squeak, bark, or scream was considered exciting. Henley thought it would be sensational if he could show his lover's final clinch just as a rooster was crowing and dawn broke over the horizon. It would symbolize perfectly the wonderful future awaiting the boy and girl after all the hellish trouble they had been through in the picture.

²⁰³[In fact MGM failed to make as many films per year with Buster as Buster had managed to make per year before he went there]

²⁰⁴[A grudging way of saying that Buster was still a certified bankable star, even in second rate product, after the Wall Street crash; and that excellent profits were made even after many previously bankable stars had been swept away by the microphone and length of service.]

Arrangements were made for the use of a poultry farm out in the San Fernando Valley. The farmer's best-looking rooster was selected to do the crowing. Shooting at daybreak meant that the two romantic leads, the director, his assistants, and other crew members had to be out at the farm several hours before the sun came up to make their preparations.

The rooster proved amiable enough about sitting on the fence. The sun also came up on schedule. But when Henley yelled, "Camera!" the bird became frightened and flew off the fence. By the time they got him back on the fence the sun was too high to make the scene.

With a sigh, Henley instructed everybody to return next morning at three again. "This time," he vowed, "we'll make sure that damn rooster can't fly away on us. We'll tie his feet to the fence with wire."

But on this second morning when the sun came up the rooster was so intent on freeing his feet of the wire that he did not crow.

"There is only one way to make that rooster crow," announced the cameraman, a know-it-all who now suddenly claimed he was born on a Kansas farm whose roosters for years had won all prizes at the County Fair. "You get a second rooster to crow. On hearing this, our rooster will get jealous and will try to outcrow him."

It was possibly a sound theory, but neither rooster uttered a sound on the following morning.

"I forgot to tell you one thing, Hobart," the cameraman whispered to the director, "that was to have a lot of hens around so the roosters will have something to crow for." This resulted only in another failure. Either the hens placed on display were less alluring than anticipated or possibly the rooster was too fussy. The important thing was that once more he failed to crow.

At this stage of the crisis somebody in the crew recalled that there was an amateur performer in South Gate who might solve the whole situation. His speciality was imitating the birds and beasts of forest and farmyard. When a representative of the movie company went all the way to South Gate, a remote Los Angeles suburb, to call on him this chap thought his fortune was made. He told his wife, "My big movie break has come at last."

On arriving at the farm he kept asking for the make-up man. He was crushed when told he would need no make-up as they weren't going to photograph him crowing, as that would destroy the illusion they were seeking. He was just to imitate the rooster off stage.

The human rooster was a whiz, it turned out. The real rooster may have been too impressed to attempt to compete with him. Anyway once more he didn't crow, meaning the loss of another morning's work.

Though the farmer was enjoying all of these profitable delays and his wife was making pin money each morning providing breakfasts for the whole troupe, he was an honest man and explained at this point:

"My rooster can see that it's a man crowing at him," he said. "that's why he refuses to crow back."

Henley decided to try just once more. This time he instructed the animal imitator to hide behind the corner of the farmhouse until the sun peeped over the horizon. He handed the fellow a big branch of sagebrush.

"Just as the sun rises," he said, "stick out your head and crow like mad. But hold that branch in front of your face so the rooster won't know it's you."

That next morning, while preparing the breakfast for the crew, the farmer's wife looked out of the window and discovered a man she had never seen before crouching under her window. She took it for granted he was crazy because he was holding up a sagebrush before his face.

She telephoned the sherriff who hustled over, took in the scene with his own eyes, and demanded of the loiterer,

"What do you think you're doing here?"

The bird and beast imitator assumed that the sherriff was one of Henley's aides.

"Oh, I'm the rooster," he explained.

"Well, I'll take you to a place where you'll find some lovely hens," said the sherriff.

Without further ado, he rushed off the man from South Gate to the lockup to await a sanity hearing.

When Henley discovered that his rooster imitator had vanished, he gave up the whole idea. He let his lovers kiss for the fade-out without the aid of a cock saluting the dawn.

Louise Brooks: "For it was as a little boy that he established his comic character, and he remained the same little boy until those destructive experiences known as 'reality' smashed his lovely world to smithereens. Part of this world in 1928 was Buster Keaton's Beverly Hills estate, a magnificent playpen full of hilarious activity. Keaton at home was no different from Keaton in films. He went about each project with the same adorable conviction of a good little boy doing a good thing in the best possible way. After the most idiotically inspired dives off the springboard into the pool, he would go to the patio and barbecue the most perfect steaks. Indoors in the living room above a high balcony, it had pleased him to rig a red velvet curtain on which he could swing down across the room to the top of a grand piano. When, with Louis Wolheim, he played thousand-dollar bridge games against such combustible opponents as Sam Goldwyn, he was still having a grave good time, confident that he would win. And he always did. One midnight he took a fancy to drive Buster Collier and me in his roadster to Culver City, through the gates of the MGM studio and out to his bungalow on the back lot. Against three walls of the sitting room were tall built-in bookcases. Buster opened the front door, flipped on the light, picked up a baseball bat and strolled neatly round the room, smashing the glass in each and every bookcase. Who then could foresee that within so short a time his job, his family, and his home- all would be lost to him? Thank goodness, he never lost his skill with a baseball bat." Louise Brooks. [From Double Exposure by Roddy McDowall.]

If it had been a fire, they [the studio security police] would have come to put it out. Otherwise, they don't care much about what happens in here.

Louise Brooks: 'He seemed unable to deal with people in the real world. That is when, I suspect, booze ceased to be a creative release and became his solution to wretched reality. Perhaps that was what he was doing the night he took a baseball bat to the glass doors in his bungalow... trying to break out of his cage, escape to creation. But he never made it. He had lost his magic power over booze.' Did he know Louise Brooks well?

I think as a general friend around the group, yes. According to Louise, she knew him a lot better than he knew her, if you know what I mean, kind of hanging on the coat-tails a little. Because she wasn't in the business *that* long, and she wound up living in like Rochester New York or somewhere the whole last part of her life. That's where they interviewed her for the book, where she wrote about Buster in Roddy McDowall's book. When Roddy came out and did all these pictures at the house, he wanted Buster to write about Stan Laurel, and Stan Laurel to write

about Buster, but he didn't have Stan's address, he didn't know how to find Stan, and I said,

"Well, that's easy."

So I gave him the address, wrote it down for him and the phone number and everything; but he then got busy with a film or doing something, and he didn't get around to calling Stan for almost a month. And by the time he got to it Stan had died, so that's why Louise Brooks wound up writing about Buster, because Stan wasn't around to do it.

Buster Collier: "Buster had a private fun factory when he was on his own with Joe Schenck, but at MGM he was just another employee, expensive yes, but still an employee."
"He could never say he was hurt... It was those hangovers that began to do him in... Oh boy, those hangovers!"

The kids were like eight and ten when the divorce took place. He was pretty much out of the marriage in '28, and moved to MGM in '29, so it was all within a year that it all happened. As I say, I always knew it was painful for him to talk about it, so I never mentioned it, I never asked any questions, and what little bit I picked up, he'd let something drop occasionally or like Louise [Keaton] once in a while would say something, but I never heard anything other than that.

Did he feel betrayed?

Well, yes, I would certainly think so. I never understood why he didn't wind up hating Joe Schenck, but he didn't, he always considered Joe his second father, and father knows best. Like sending him to MGM, he understood that Joe wanted to go to... see, Fox was going under, it was going into bankruptcy, and they wanted him to come there and straighten it out and get them back on their feet, that's when it became Twentieth Century Fox, and he went over there. Buster understood all of this, and why they were sending him to MGM, so he didn't really feel that bad about it until he got into Spite Marriage, and up until then he kind of retained control, but that's when everybody said, "Oh boy, we've got a comic." They'd never had a comic on the lot before because Louis B. Mayer hated comedy and comics, so everybody wanted to play, everybody wanted to get into it, so he lost control of everything, he was not allowed to say anything about anything. Then, on top of everything, they made two or three films in three or four languages, and he had to do all this, he had to make the movie four times. Made it in English, then they hired a Spanish cast and he read parrot fashion off the blackboard. Then a German, and then French. By the time he'd gone through that, he's a screaming idiot, a total exhausted wreck Everything piled on.

I do know that he was not *that* unhappy during The Cameraman and possibly Spite Marriage.

MR. BUSTER KEATON
1004 Hartford Way
Beverly Hills, Calif.

June, 3, 1930.

YOU ARE INSTRUCTED TO REPORT TO ME AT OUR CULVER CITY STUDIO AT TEN O' CLOCK A.M. WEDNESDAY JUNE FOURTH TO RESUME YOUR SERVICES IN OUR PHOTOPLAY TENTATIVELY TITLED MAN O WAR (STOP) YOU ARE FURTHER ADVISED THAT YOUR REFUSAL TO COMPLY THIS AFTERNOON HAS CAUSED US CONSIDERABLE LOSS AND

THAT FURTHER LOSS WILL BE CAUSED IN EVENT YOU REFUSE TO
COMPLY AND RESUME YOUR SERVICES
METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER CORPORATION.
IRVING.G.THALBERG. VICE PRESIDENT.

Thalberg hears Buster out, then:-

"The answer, is yes. I'm going to let you produce your own pictures. Now Buster, you're ahead of schedule. Here is what I want you to do: finish your next picture- and, I repeat, your next- then take Natalie to Europe. Have a good time for yourselves."

AUGUST. DOUGHBOYS.²⁰⁵

German and Spanish versions.

How did you conceive of the screen character you usually portrayed?

That's not easy. In laying out *The Navigator* for instance.... The same thing as going into the army in making *Doughboys*. We start in the office with a very rich character, well dressed and everything else. Now when you give me an army outfit that I was too small for- everything was big that they gave me in the Army- I'm a misfit, and come to living in the barracks and eating in the mess hall, that was a hardship to me. But if I'd been a bum in the first place, it would have been an improvement. Well, then you lay out your character according to the situations you're going to get into.

Did Buster ever mention much about *Doughboys*?

He seemed to enjoy most of that, because not only Ed directed it, but Ed and Cliff Edwards were in it and he got to do two or three things in there that he had actually done at the end of the war putting those shows on waiting to come home, like the snakedance and all that. They were take-offs on real vaudeville people that he'd done. He got to use all his own material from (laughs) when he was actually in the war, put it into the movie, about the war. I've seen it many times, it's a good film.

The general criticism is that it's scrappy and not one of Buster's best...

It's not going to come up to *The General* or *Hospitality* or one of those, but it was a good little film, and the thing is too when you're taking peoples critiques, they could be seeing botched up prints, with things left out, scratchy, badly reproduced, so you can't really guarantee unless you *know* they've seen a good clean full-length print, I wouldn't rely too much on their opinion.²⁰⁶ I thought it was a cute movie. There's one sequence on the boat, when they're going off to war, that Buster and Cliff are playing ukeleles, and Cliff does all that peep peep [demonstrates scat singing] wierd things with his voice that sounds like an instrument, and Ed Sedgwick has got a broom with strings on it and he plays a slap bass and they make music, and it's a real cute little musical number that they do. They have fun doing that kind of thing in the film.

And yet it says scenario Richard Schayer, whoever he is. It seems that *Doughboys* is almost 90% Buster's material, it's basically autobiographical, the only such one.

Uhuh. When you're talking about this Schayer being the writer, at MGM everything had to be scripted and on paper. Maybe they talked about it and he

²⁰⁵[*Doughboys* were originally small round cakes served to American sailors, but in the middle 1800's it came to mean American soldiers, whose large brass buttons were thought to resemble same.]

²⁰⁶[Many available copies of most of Buster's movies have important sections of the outer edge of the frame cropped off, and are shown far too fast. Some have important sections edited out. E.G. Of two different prints I have of *The General*, one markedly lacks shots contained in the other.]

wrote the thing, then Buster put all his own stuff in. Maybe he dictated vaguely what it was about and the guy wrote it down.

That same year my matrimonial troubles began. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say they began in earnest that year. Like the wife of every other male movie star, my wife had previously had attacks of jealousy. I suppose this was natural. M-G-M, along with the other major studios, employed dozens of the world's most beautiful women. Some of them were very young and exceedingly eager to make a place for themselves in pictures. Some of them did not limit their use of sex appeal to get what they wanted to the hours they spent before the camera.

There are always benevolent characters in Hollywood, and I suppose every other town in the world, who unselfishly drop all their own business the first chance they get to interfere in yours. My wife was forever hearing stories about my over-friendliness to this bright-eyed starlet or that leading lady.

Most of these stories had not a grain of truth in them. Most, I say, not all. The only comment I care to make on this is that I would like to see the healthy, normal man in my spot at M-G-M who could resist more feminine temptation than I did.²⁰⁷

I was a star, and in Hollywood. It's an automatic problem in the best of circumstances. Why even Joe Schenck could have second thoughts seeing a pic that he himself had chosen and produced for Norma. No one could do a love scene better than her, so convincingly that a man has to call himself aside: is all of that acting? Everyone said- and I believe- that Clark Gable's love scenes on the screen broke up his first marriage. Like all of us, he was on the spot: look like you're enjoying it and your wife jumps to conclusions; look like you're not and you're out of a job.

Joan Crawford: 'I know how witchy some women can be- and some of the worst specimens are right here in Hollywood. Hollywood is the mecca for some of the most beautiful girls in America. Unfortunately, there are about 200,000 more women than men in Hollywood. Because of that, most of the men in Hollywood are spoiled- and it's the women who do the spoiling. It's also true that some of the girls, in their eagerness to attach a male, will stop at nothing. Particularly they won't stop because the male is already married or believed to be in love with another woman.' 1947.

It finally got so that Natalie took for granted that I had an affair with every leading lady. There again, you're stuck; keep trying out new ones to get a good actress and you're promiscuous, a chaser; get a good one and put her on the payroll and it's "Where are you keeping her?" I was accused every picture. She knew I was chasing them, and I knew I wasn't. But Mrs. Buster Keaton kept seeing rivals everywhere.

A good example is what happened when I went on a duck-hunting trip early in 1930 with Buster Collier and Gilbert Roland. Marie Prevost, who was Collier's girl friend at the time, insisted on coming along. We were snowed in on that trip, and the Los Angeles Examiner heard about it and published the story under this headline:

MARIE PREVOST SNOWED IN WITH THREE COMPANIONS

There was no other girl along, but nothing I could say could convince my wife of that. Once or twice she threatened to leave me. I do not know yet whether these threats were made seriously or to scare me into being a nice little husband who was always at home in time for dinner and polite to her guests.

²⁰⁷[Especially since he'd been denied conjugal rights at home since 1924.]



1931

Shortly after I started making pictures at M-G-M, Irving Thalberg's brother-in-law, Lawrence Weingarten, had been installed as producer of my pictures. But for quite a while he exercised little more authority over my crew, cast, and selection of story material than the fat cop on the corner. For quite a while before the breakup of my marriage I had not been happy about the way things were working out at the studio. Despite everything I could do, control of my comedies kept slipping out of my hands more and more. But just about the time I was divorced, Mr. Weingarten decided to stop being a rubber-stamp executive and take over as a producer with an iron will.

Larry Weingarten in the past quarter-century has produced an imposing number of important and successful dramatic pictures. Furthermore, with Thalberg dead these many years and most of the other old M-G-M brass gone, Larry is still there and getting along fine. With the number of high-level shake-ups the studio has undergone, this, needless to say, requires a good deal of talent, of another sort.

Nobody can deny that Larry learned his trade somewhere along the line and learned it well. But his trade was never slapstick comedy, and that was what I was still doing whether he and the studio's top dogs realized it or not. Perhaps they were deceived because, when I had been full-length features, I had stopped throwing custard pies and also eliminated impossible gags (like the one in which I dived through the cement walk and came up years later with a Chinese family.)

If they had known that I was still essentially a slapstick comedian they would not have bought for me the sort of stories they did. These purchases included two Broadway farces: *Parlor, Bedroom, and Bath* and *Her Cardboard Lover*.

FEBRUARY. PARLOR, BEDROOM AND BATH.

French and German versions.

Lawrence Weingarten: 'We were desperate, we didn't know what to do. Sedgwick, the director, and I were riding down Hollywood Boulevard by the old El Capitan Theater which is now the Paramount. We saw a play, a matinee, an old Avery Hopwood play with Charlotte Greenwood. It said 'Parlor, Bedroom and Bath'. I said, "Eddie, let's go in and see this." We saw it and it appeared to be the genesis of an idea. So we bought the play for \$6,000 including Charlotte Greenwood's salary...'

Buster to Thalberg.. "It's a farce- not my kind of story, [Thalberg's face falls] ...but we'll make a good pic."

But I know for a finish, they were picking stories and material without consulting me, and I couldn't argue them out of it. They'd say, "This is funny." and I say, "It stinks."- it didn't make any difference, we did it anyhow....

He was always playing the dope. So they tabbed him as a dope and figured they could get away with murder- gyp him, put him down, knife him. Too many times he went along rather than make a scene. (Blesh.)

Too many times? In what sense?

I have no idea what I was talking about, if that was me speaking. I think people that were inclined to take advantage of him or wanted to take advantage of him

hoped he was like that, (laughs) it made it easier for them. But anybody that knew him certainly knew different.

What do you mean by, 'people that wanted to take advantage of him?'
Oh, producers, directors and this and that, people in his work that wanted to 'Do it their way', be the boss, that kind of thing.

Farce comedies are based on a 'Simple misunderstanding or mistaken identity.' There are always a couple of characters in the show, who if they would come out and say, 'Wait a minute, this is the case', all the problems would be solved.

Then there's farce tempo. In all farce stories, everybody works faster than they do when they're telling a legitimate story. They take things bigger. People get hysterical easily....

Weingarten: "He was a sweet fellow. But here's a boy had never gone to school, I don't think he was ever in a school...."

Oh, I was speaking Spanish. I spoke French too. I even did one for Metro in German. Parlor, Bedroom and Bath in German! I memorized a sentence at a time, see. I did that also in French and Spanish.

Eddie Sedgwick once said something interesting about this. He said that audiences everywhere knew I was an American and did not expect me to speak their language without making mistakes. Also, being a comedian, I could mispronounce words, and they might think it was on purpose and to get laughs, whereas if a romantic performer made such mistakes he would seem grotesque.

They had worked out an interesting technique for these foreign language remakes. They used 'idiot cards'. On these the foreign words are spelled out in phonetic English and held up beyond camera range for the performer to consult as the scenes are shot. I never liked the idiot cards. I preferred memorizing one single sentence or two or three, while the scenes I was not in were being made. I enjoyed learning how to roll my 'r's' in speaking Spanish and French, and mastering the guttarals used in German. It was awfully hard work, because by the time I'd satisfied the Spanish dialog supervisor, I'd then get the French cast, and by the time I'd get to the German I'd hear the German supervisor say,

"Oh, I understand him very well, only he's speaking with a French-Spanish accent..."

Once when we did a German version of a picture just after the French one, the Teutonic language expert said to me,
"They told me you were an American. If that's true why are you speaking German with a French accent?"

Claude Autant-Lara. Director of French versions of B.K.'s MGM movies. Speaking in English: "And I say,
"It's maybe very good for America, but this picture doesn't mean anything for frenchmen, I don't think they'll laugh at that picture."
So he say

"What do you think?"

I say "You must change this this and this, a little detail.." and he says

"Go ahead."

When I came back after lunch I saw they had put a movieola on the set, and from that minute I had to see the scene of the American picture, like it had been shot in the American version, and to copy it exactly, in French. And I say

"Buster, what can I do?" I say "My boy." [shrugging] He told me,

"If you don't obey, you will be fired!" "

Claude Autant Lara [in French]: "My brief and unique collaborations with Buster Keaton were the French versions of 'Parlor Bedroom and

Bath' and 'The Passionate Plumber' of which I have nothing to glorify myself about, since as co-producer with the American Edward Brophy I was limited by the fact that I had orders from above to effect a strict transferral of the original films.

As to my relations with Buster they were simple, starting from the fact that we had the unquestionable order to re-do the film with French actors. As a result there was almost no creativity in the real sense of the term. The few modified passages took place in a certain number of meetings with Buster, above all in the bungalow which he had on the interiors of the sets of MGM studios, where I was happy to stay and roam through the duration of my time in American luxury. Buster would turn up there about nine o'clock in a little two-seater baby Austin, a toy car, which made the Americans bust themselves laughing it was so small. The other seat, at his side, was nearly always occupied by an enormous St. Bernard, named Elmer, who sat there dribbling continually. From nine in the morning in this grand cell, the Phillipino who was at his service was always putting before those working there, the auteur, the producers and Buster, long drinks with a high alcohol content which very rapidly, and although they were iced, finally evaporated into the atmosphere. In two hours time, Buster, who had a capacity to absorb twice, thrice or four times ours, went from his normal pink to scarlet. By midday he was apoplectic and he was very funny, he was well out of it and his voice would become raucous. He had a continual inventiveness. I knew from the start that most of his gags came from him, and he tested out these comic ideas for their true usefulness. He executed them with a perfection that only a great clown can give. The possibilities for a great actor that he had in him!

This little guy, who was a good deal smaller than me and I'm not all that big, had an incredible agility. He was rubber, certainly double-jointed since youth and with an incredible dynamism. He could instantaneously mime out scenes. For his impassiveness had only been an effect of research for the perfect comic effect. In town he was the opposite of his [screen] personage, with a mobility and vivacity that were quite astonishing. I'm speaking here of Buster in his golden days. He had no other cares but sentimental adventures and continual disputes on this score with his wife. As for the rest, he was a king of the MGM studios at that time, this could be seen in the shining euphoria which emanated from his whole person." Claude Autant Lara. 1963.²⁰⁸

Louis B. Mayer was so pleased by the large earnings of Free and Easy that he rewarded me with a \$10,000 bonus and a three-month vacation with pay. Adding my \$3,000 a week salary for thirteen weeks, the bonus, I suppose, actually amounted to \$49,000.

On our vacation Natalie and I took a leisurely trip through Europe. After visiting England, France, and Germany we toured Spain with Gilbert Roland, who was born in Madrid but soon afterward was taken to Mexico City where he grew up.

Gilbert was one of the many romantic-looking Latins who got their chance in Hollywood following the sensational success of Rudolph Valentino. He is about the only one in the group still active. [1960?]

One of the thrills of the trip was being hailed by the Spaniards as 'Pamplinas', their nickname for me. I found out what 'Pamplinas' means only when I appeared with Jose Greco on the Garry Moore TV program. While the brilliant flamenco dancer was rehearsing I asked him to translate the word into English. He couldn't, but held an animated conversation on the subject for about ten minutes with his manager and the members of his troupe. This in Spanish, of course, which I understand about as well as I do Japanese. Finally Greco turned to me and explained, "Pamplinas' in English means 'a little bit of nothing'."

²⁰⁸[Kindly translated for me from the French by Julian Bell.]

"A little bit of nothing!" I exclaimed. "Couldn't they call me 'a little bit of something?' That would be bad enough. But a little bit of nothing! After all- "

Greco told me that I was mistaken. He explained:

"That's the finest compliment my countrymen could pay you." I could only reply, "It sure loses something in the translation."

My French nickname 'Malec' for which there is no literal translation means about the same thing- 'the hole in the doughnut' or 'a blank piece of paper.'"

Another big thrill for me was going to the bullfights with a knowledgeable aficionado like Gilbert Roland. Until then I had seen only third-rate contests in such Mexican border towns as Tijuana and Juarez. Gilbert, on the other hand, had been studying this bravest of all sports since he was a little boy in Mexico. He was only too happy to explain the fine points to me. My wife did not go to the arena with us, as she thought bullfighting cruel. So Gilbert Roland and I attended the fights alone. We saw all the fights we could, beginning with those at San Sebastian. Now I am not one of those actors who is embarrassed or annoyed when recognized by movie fans. To me, they are customers, and I try to behave toward them as though I were fully aware of that.

So I was anything but displeased when someone in that crowd at San Sebastian caught sight of me and passed the word along that 'Pamplinas' was a fellow spectator. Soon you could hear the whisper 'Pamplinas' passing all around that large amphitheater. And in no time the entire arena was reverberating with shouts of 'Pamplinas! Pamplinas!'

The nicest thing about getting this sort of big hello in Spain is that the fans demand so little of you. Perhaps this is not surprising in a country where dignity is held [to be] every man's birthright. All Spanish fans expect you to do is acknowledge their greeting by standing up and bowing. They don't claw at you or ask for your autograph. You sit down and also leave, unpawed, unpestered, and you are deeply touched that such considerate people have paid you a tribute.

Another appreciated honor that day was having the Number One matador dedicate the second bull he killed to their old deadpan 'Pamplinas!'

I got the same heartwarming reception at other bullfights we attended. But the most memorable experience of this sort I had on the trip was in Toledo whose wooden bull ring was the most picturesque arena in all Spain.

It was a dreadful day for the matadors. All three had wretched luck, but the worst of it was reserved for the featured matador. The first bull he faced was so bad he was unable to put up a decent contest. His second bull could not be lured, bullied, or irritated into following his red cloth. There is nothing a matador can do to arouse the fighting spirit of a beast under such circumstances.

Now, those aficionados at Toledo knew this, of course, far better than I. Nevertheless that crowd was merciless. They screamed, whistled, hooted, and threw their cushions and everything else movable at the luckless matador. They demanded that the President of the Bullfight order him thrown out of the ring. But this was merely their first request. Before the afternoon was over they were pleading with the President of the Bullfight to have the man cast into a dungeon to be castrated by the village blacksmith.

At this fight, as at others, I had stood up, my heart swelling with pride and gratitude on being recognized. But when a howling mob of spectators surged down upon me as we were leaving I was not sure that they were not going to wreak their vengeance on me. After all, they were, as far as I could gather, in no mood for hero worship. And I looked around for Gilbert Roland, who might have explained to me what was going on, but I had lost him in the crowd.

Meanwhile I was being lifted on the shoulders of a couple of husky young fellows who started carrying me to our hotel. Even then, with all kinds of shouting going on, I couldn't figure out whether they planned to kiss me or lynch me as a foreigner who had

put the jinx on their show. I felt quite relieved when I was set down in one piece on the hotel's front steps.

Gilbert Roland then came running up.

"What in hell did they do that for?" I asked him as we went inside.

Gilbert explained that the Toledans were in the habit each Sunday of carrying on their shoulders the matador who had most distinguished himself during the afternoon. He said,

"They didn't care to return to town empty-handed. So they carried you back. You see now, Buster, what humble men these are. They'll settle for anybody, even you."

When we got to Granada the local Rotary Club invited us to a lunch in a beautiful restaurant. About a hundred persons were present and listened solemnly to the speeches of their officers made to welcome us and Roland's response.

After that many toasts were offered, by the presiding member, and drunk. Gilbert explained what each was for. But after we'd downed the last goblet of wine, he was silent.

"Don't hold out on me." I said. "What was that last toast for?"

"Oh, we were drinking to the death of the king." he replied casually.

I was horrified to hear that I'd been drinking to the death of a man who had done me no harm, whom I did not know, and in whose country we were traveling.

"But I thought Alfonso was the most popular man in Spain!" I exclaimed to Roland,

"Why do they want their king to die?" Roland shrugged.

"Alfonso is very popular. Nobody has anything against him personally. They are just sick of having to keep and support a royal family. They think it would help business a lot if they got rid of him and his whole gang any way they could."

"If that is the state of things in Spain," I said, "don't you think it might be smart to start heading home?"

Smilingly, Gilbert agreed, and that very day we started on the long trip North. And on April 14, 1931, the day we left Spain for France, the toothy, gay Alfonso also crossed the Portuguese border never to return to the country he had been born to rule.

That was a group thing, Constance and Gilbert Roland, and probably Joe Schenck and Norma. I think it was a joint thing, they all went, because I know one of the places they went was Spain, and Gilbert, naturally, being a mexican, was able to translate the language for them. I think that there was some kind of political brou-haha that had to do with Franco, Gilbert could understand all of this that was going on, it was like a revolution starting was what it was. And when he told Buster and Joe and them what was going on, they said, "We're going to get out of here." They had this great big old car that they had rented, and another car for baggage and everything, so they threw all the clothes and everything, packed it up and threw it into this van, or whatever, and they got in the car, and they drove like bats out of hell to get into France, because they were down near Barcelona at the time, it wasn't all that far to get into France, and they got out of the country. It was evidently the start of that whole revolution with Franco. That's about all I can remember about the trip. And then the fact that Buster had to prove he wasn't Jewish in order to get into Germany, because Hitler was in power by then, rising quickly. As a matter of fact, I think only he and Natalie went to Germany, because Joe couldn't have gone, he was jewish.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE.

...one day in February 1932, all hell broke loose.

1931. Sidewalks of New York. Passionate Plumber. Jimmy Durante. Just dandy. Yacht. Divorce. Land yacht.

September 1931. In a 3 page article in Motion Picture magazine headed Doesn't Fatty Arbuckle deserve a break? Including support from Laurel and Hardy, Marion Davies, Marie Dressler, Lew Cody, Joe Schenck, James Cruze and others:

I have seen Roscoe 'take it on the chin' for ten years. I have seen the grit, the gameness of the man. He hasn't gone about feeling sorry for himself. He hasn't asked others to feel sorry for him. He doesn't want or need sympathy. All he wants is a square deal- all he needs is common justice.

On 25 August 1932, Roscoe started performing in films again.

SEPTEMBER. 1931. SIDEWALKS OF NEW YORK.

Directed by Jules White and Zion Myers. Grossed more than any other Buster film.

Jules White..had no talent. He was the one that made Sidewalks of New York which was the worst picture Buster ever made.

The total grosses for Doughboys and Sidewalks of New York were \$814,000 and \$855,000, earning net profits of \$141,000 and \$196,000. Each cost \$276,000 apiece. These were impressive profits for the depression. Many MGM movies at this time didn't do nearly as well, and a fair few made big losses. [G.A.T.Dardis.]

I came back feeling fine physically- and got a new shock. While I was away Larry Weingarten, without consulting me, had bought a dog²⁰⁹ of a comedy from a director of small-budget comedies and also assigned this man ²¹⁰to direct this new picture. I read the story, which was called The Sidewalks of New York, and told Larry it was impossible. The plot required me to cope with a gang of juvenile delinquents; I might have done that. What I couldn't cope with, I said, was the plot. But I couldn't convince him he had bought a lemon.

I felt this so strongly that I went over his head and appealed to Irving Thalberg to help get me out of the assignment. Irving was usually on my side, but this time he said, "Larry likes it. Everybody else in the studio likes the story. You are the only one who doesn't."

In the end, I gave up like a fool and said, "What the hell?" Who was I to say I was right and everyone else wrong? I'd been wrong about my marriage, hadn't I? That was the way I reasoned.

So I mainly would blame myself for what happened.

The result would have been different if I had trusted my own judgement and not let them put me in parts I couldn't play. I cannot even claim I did not realize that the stories were wrong for me. I knew that when I did them.

There I was, sitting on top of the world- on a toboggan. No one saw it for four or five pictures, then it got so bad no one could miss it- What, No Beer? and Sidewalks of New York, oh, they were brutal! I knew before the camera turned on the first scene that we had a perfect foundation for a stinker. And by now, I couldn't tell anyone anything. They had one answer for it all.

"What's happened to Keaton? Nice guy, but he's slipping."

So- I slipped. I did what so many others have done. I started drinking too much. And that's when I blew it. I got to the stage where I didn't give a darn whether school kept or not, and then when I found out that they could write stories and material better than I could anyway, well, here's me fighting with them. Of course it

²⁰⁹[Mr. White was well known for making canine movies.]

²¹⁰[See Columbia cheaters.]

only took about two bad pictures in a row to put skids under you. Oh, everything happened!

The new directors alternated telling me how to walk, how to talk, how to stand, and how to fall- where and when, how fast or slow, how loud or soft. I was Trilby with two Svengalis- MGM had gone to the two-platoon with unlimited substitutions.²¹¹

But somehow The Sidewalks of New York was finished and cut. At the preview it did not get a giggle, something which was blamed on me; I have no serious complaint about that. As I see it, the star gets the credit for turning in good pictures. Therefore, it is only fair that he be blamed for the bad ones he is in, including those he was bullied and hornswoggled into working in. It came out such a complete stinker, such an unbelievable bomb, that they gave Sedgwick back to me.

1932

I suppose it isn't entirely fair to blame Larry Weingarten, Louis B. Mayer, or any other person for what happened to me in their studio during those dark days of the depression. The entertainment industry is always the first hit in bad times, and the movie mogul's financial aches and pains in the early thirties were compounded by the upheaval caused by the talkies.

Hard pressed on all sides, the kingpins of Hollywood were forced to make experiments. Many of these turned out disastrously, something which is inevitable when the experiments are inspired by fear and undertaken as a last resort. The experiment I know most about was the one made by Louis B. Mayer when he teamed up Jimmy Durante and myself in a series of features.

FEBRUARY. THE PASSIONATE PLUMBER.

Took only 19 days to shoot. Last MGM film to be completed on time. French version.

The thing is, he enjoyed working with people, he enjoyed working with Gilbert Roland in the Passionate Plumber. It wasn't necessarily a good movie, but he had a good time working with Gilbert because they were friends. And another one, Parlor Bedroom and Bath was Charlotte Greenwood, and she was a great old gal from the Broadway stage and everything. So that's what he talked about, he enjoyed working with these people. Not necessarily that he thought the movie was good, he just had fun working with them.

So I had Sedgwick, but I also had a story- Her Cardboard Lover, from the stage. I was assigned the role played on the stage by Leslie Howerd, an Englishman with gazelle eyes and manners to match. It was entirely wrong for me. M-G-M renamed it The Passionate Plumber, which was nothing compared to the names the critics called our movie version.

Jimmy Durante was in the cast, they brought him in there to play a part in the picture with me. Of course, when you give me a Jimmy Durante- well, Durante just can't keep quiet. He's going to talk no matter what happens. You can't direct him any other way. There is no one in the world like Durante, bless him, but in my opinion we just did not belong in the same movies.

²¹¹[American Football is usually played with each side having, in effect, two separate teams, one for offense and one for defense, with the one replacing the other whenever possession of the ball changes. Also there are additional players each of whom may be sent in to replace a player on the field at any time (except when play is actually in progress): hence, 'unlimited substitutions.' K.H.]

As the dynamo of the smash-em-up team Clayton, Jackson, and Durante, Jimmy had electrified night-club, vaudeville, and musical-comedy audiences for years. Nothing could have been more hilarious than Jimmy pulling apart a piano or the team's 'Wood! Wood! Wood!' number in which everything constructed of wood, from a kitchen match to a full-sized canoe and an outhouse, was dragged on the stage. Jimmy also was successful, though to a lesser extent, on the radio and was great later in his own TV show.

But the moment he broke up the team at M-G-M's suggestion, Jimmy, depending almost entirely on his singing, piano playing, and priceless personality was unable ever to carry one successful picture. My guess is that without ingenious sight gags to work with he lacked the variety required of the star of a screen comedy running from seventy-five to ninety minutes. But the same thing is true of Ed Wynn and W.C. Fields, two of the greatest clowns of the century, in spite of the fact that they used brilliant sight gags- so my guess about Durante could well be wrong.

At any rate, as I see it, there was no way to mesh, match, or blend Durante's talents with mine. He tried hard and I tried hard, but our styles, our timing didn't jibe. Yet Jimmy would have been great in the pictures that we did together if he had been allowed merely to do spots of comedy instead of playing a character all of the way through.

From the time Jimmy and I were teamed up I heard rumors that Mr. Mayer was planning to build him up at my expense. That didn't worry me much, although I can't say I liked it. With my record of successful pictures, I felt I was a fixture at M-G-M. I couldn't imagine anyone there wanting to get rid of me. If Jimmy Durante could replace me it would be on his superior ability. Like a lot of men the world considers modest and humble I had unshakable confidence in my talent and ability to hold the place that I had staked out for myself.

Louis B. Mayer liked him very much; it could have been that he was brought out to replace me, I don't know.... I could see that MGM was grooming Durante. He knew it too- but he stole no scenes.

Sam Marx: "Jimmy being co-starred with him was an attempt to make a team that would presumably go through the roof as a great comedy team. Although I also liked Jimmy Durante, he was a totally different calibre of comedian. He had very little class, so to speak, but that was part of his class, that he had no class. It pained me at times to see some of the movies I had to go to as a preview of their new feature pictures."

Lawrence Weingarten: "No, Keaton was doing a certain amount of business. And we thought that Durante... in this particular role, would be fine, that's all. We weren't thinking of bolstering him. There were a number of pictures made, we tried our best. If it wasn't good enough, that's another thing. But we didn't set out to destroy Buster..." ²¹²

Buster never said anything against Jimmy except that, well, I don't know if he even said it, but somebody said that they used Buster to build Durante's career, because nobody in pictures had ever heard of him, so they put him in Buster's pictures to build his career, and Myra absolutely hated it, because he was,.. he wasn't deliberately mean, but he was as strong as a bull and every time he had to grab Buster or push him or anything in those pictures, he'd leave black and blue

²¹²[Note the tacit admission that MGM did in fact destroy Buster...]

marks, because he was so powerful and so strong, and he probably didn't even realise that he was, I don't think he was deliberately mean, Myra did. They stayed friendly all through the years. After Durante had a couple of strokes, something or other, he was physically off, we went out to his house and visited him. It wasn't anything Buster carried any grudge about over the years. I don't think he carried grudges against anybody.

Durante invariably punctuated all his conversations with Buster by punching him on the upper arms and chest. Since Durante was, "Strong as a bull," this hurt. Buster was simply too polite to tell him to stop. (Dardis.)

Then, one day in February 1932, all hell broke loose.
You would have to know Hollywood.

Raymond Chandler: 'In Hollywood anything can happen, anything at all.' The Big Sleep.

Somebody brought a girl, a bit player, to my bungalow for lunch. Later that afternoon Carruthers had gone, and I was there alone with Ukelele Ike Edwards and Clarence Logan, an M-G-M publicity man, when this tigress came back. But both of them ran for their lives when she steamed into action. She announced that she had made up her mind that I should support her.

"I've decided to let you keep me!"

"Just dandy." I said, "And now, kid, I've got news for you- I'm not keeping you or anybody. Now flag your ass out of here quick."

Good Christ! She starts screaming like Louise Fazenda. She scratched my face and ripped off my shirt and undershirt and started to scratch and claw away at me. I had been too stunned by her daffy behaviour to move.

Meanwhile this gentlewoman was breaking my dressing-room windows and screaming like some crazy old witch. But when the lady picked up a pair of long shears and lunged at me with them, I knocked them out of her hand. I finally got her off me and backhanded her in self-defense, I belted her in the jaw with all I had.

Then I was really in the soup. It could have been one of my pictures. My God! Her screams brought the studio police, and a couple of Culver City policemen arrived. They turned out to be unlucky cops, even they had trouble getting her out. When they tried to drag her away she kicked one in the genitals and took a backhanded swipe at the other, giving him a black eye.

One week later she's in bandages, has a crew of doctors and lawyers, and is suing me for ten thousand. It's all in the papers. Reporters go to the Villa.

"What are your views, Mrs. Keaton?" Natalie wouldn't talk to them. *That* helped.

EX-FILM BEAUTY CLAWS KEATON- MOVIE CLOWN²¹³

Kathleen Key Wrecked His Room When Refused \$20,000, He Charges.'
[New York Times Headline.]

I was summoned to Irving Thalberg's office. Eddie Mannix was with him. They showed me a report from the woman's doctor stating that when I hit her I broke

²¹³[I bet the EX rankled...]

her jaw.

"Now she wants \$10,000 from you." said Mannix. "If she doesn't get it she'll bring the whole mess into court."

So there's a big meeting with Mayer and Thalberg.

"Gotta kill this fast. Give her ten grand. Settle it. Now!"

"The hell with her." I said. "I didn't hit her hard enough to break her jaw. And no one with a fractured jaw was ever able to yell as loud as she did at those two cops. If you guys are worried about this," I added, "let the company fork over the \$10,000 that will shut her up."

"No," said Mannix, "you'll have to pay her. The name of M-G-M must not be on the check." But he seemed to think it all right for the name of Buster Keaton to be on the check.

They continued to argue, and in the end I had no choice. I paid. I made out the \$10,000 check and handed it over.

Needless to say, it was a long, long time before I heard the last at home about this depressing incident. Natalie had it all figured out: I'd been keeping this floozy; here was the breakup, and she wouldn't stand still for it. Then my cancelled check came back- joint account. That did it.

But eventually everything seemed to be patched up. I was told I was being forgiven only for the sake of the children.

MGM's publicity dept. decided to use the affair to give the idea Buster was a Casanova, and printed mock waiver forms to be signed by women entering Keaton's Kennel....

'The undersigned hereby deposes and states that she is in the spot designated as 'Keaton's Kennel' at her own risk and in consideration agrees that she will under no circumstances sue for any damages, either actual or punitive, arising out of any injury, broken limbs, loss of virtue, etc. or any other mishap sustained upon said premises. And she further undertakes that she hereby waives all right, legal or otherwise, to bring legal action in any court for any cause whatsoever arising from her presence in the 'Kennel'.'

On Friday 25 March, Natalie angrily departed the Villa as a result of a quarrel over Buster's intention to take Jimmy and Bobby to Mexico. When she had not returned by Monday the 28th, Buster took the boys to the MGM commissary for lunch and then to Clover Field in Santa Monica where he engaged a pilot to take him to Aguascalientes in Mexico. Willie (Carruthers) and the boy's governess, Consuelo Costello also went.

During the next week my wife disappeared, leaving no note or other word saying where she was going or when she would come back. Toward the end of the week I decided to give the boys a treat I had long been promising them; this was a weekend trip by airplane to Tijuana.

I took the boy's nurse along to take care of them. We travelled in a chartered plane, piloted by an aviator noted for his reliability. He carefully checked weather reports and equipment before each flight and refused to take up passengers if the slightest risk was involved.

The boys had the time of their lives on the way down to San Diego, where we had to stop to get clearance papers before flying across the border..

Natalie, informed of the trip, did everything she could to prevent it, engaging the help of Constance, who contacted the District Attorney's office in San Diego, a stopover for Mexican customs. She also contacted Eddie Mannix.

When we landed at San Diego the governess took Jim and Bob to the rest room.

After they were gone for ten minutes or so I went to the rest room to look for them. The attendant told me that my sons and their governess had been taken away in a police car. I hurried to the nearest police station in a cab. My kids were there all right. "What did they do now?" I asked the police official behind the desk.

"The boys haven't done anything," he explained. "but I just got a long-distance telephone call from a public official in Los Angeles requesting me to hold these boys to prevent you from kidnapping them."

"Kidnapping them?" I demanded. "How can a man kidnap his own children?"

"Damned if I know," he said, shaking his head, "but I have a lawyer on his way here to tell me why I'm holding them."

Before I had a chance to point out how silly this was the telephone on his desk rang. It turned out to be Eddie Mannix who said that my wife had phoned him in a panic. "She's afraid you're going to hide the boys from her in Mexico," he said. "She's also dead set against the idea of taking them on a dangerous trip in an airplane. You know how women are."

He explained that he was coming down to Tijuana himself in the morning. Before he left he would talk to my wife and then see me when he got to San Diego. "Okay," I said, "but at least tell this police official here to let me put the kids and the governess up at a hotel here. You can assure him I won't leave the United States without letting him know."

The police stopped the flight and sent them back to Beverly Hills in a hired car next day as per Natalie's specific instructions. She had claimed she was in deadly fear for the safety of her children and convinced the authorities, with Constance and Mannix's help that this was so. When Buster got home on Tuesday evening, Natalie was still absent.

Next day we went home to find my wife still among the missing. That really drove me wild. What was wrong with her? Why had she spoiled our weekend and caused all of that ridiculous trouble?²¹⁴

A story had even been published in the newspapers that charged me with trying to carry the boys into Mexico without her permission. I began drinking and continued drinking all of that day and part of the next. Meanwhile I heard not a word from my wife.

Buster, with the help of MGM publicity dept. tried to make a joke out of it. Summoned all the L.A. reporters to his house and had photos taken with the boys in the pose of grieving father: 'waiting for the return of mom'.

"She knows I adore her. I don't think this is anything but stubbornness on her part. I've been a bad boy, I guess, but gee, I wish she'd come home. I've called Constance's home but got no answer and I can't get an answer at my mother's place. This is my punishment, I guess."²¹⁵

Buster told the newspapers the reason for the trip was:

"To show who wears the trousers around our house. I just wanted to see who's boss.

²¹⁴[Why Indeed?]

²¹⁵[This suggests that the Talmadge women are ganging up on Buster, and have the Keaton women as allies. This implies that Buster has a mansion full of women, three totally dependent on his earnings, and three not, all fighting against him. A nasty predicament. I'd drink too much in the same spot.]

I didn't know I'd stir up a miniature war in doing it, though. Why, I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd called out the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps to greet me in San Diego."

By Thursday the papers reported all peaceful at the Keaton home.. Natalie had returned and all was forgiven. But it left out the fact that Buster had not been reporting to the studio since Monday the 28 March. Preliminary work on Speak Easily was in progress but Buster had simply refused to appear at the studio, as he'd done in the summer of 1930.

Mayer sent the following telegram

**YOU ARE HEREBY INSTRUCTED TO REPORT TO THE OFFICE OF MR.
MANNIX AT THE STUDIO AT HALF PAST TWO IN THE AFTERNOON ON
WEDNESDAY MARCH THIRTIETH NINETEEN THIRTY TWO
METRO GOLDWYN MAYER CORPORATION
LOUIS B MAYER
VICE PRESIDENT**

Buster ignored the wire, just as he ignored all official communications.[Dardis.] At the end of that week, Mayer sent..

**MARCH 29,1932 WE INSTRUCTED YOU TO REPORT TO MR.MANNIX'S
OFFICE AT OUR STUDIO ON MARCH 30, 1932, AT 2:30 P.M. YOU DID NOT
COMPLY WITH SUCH INSTRUCTION AND HAVE AT ALL TIMES SINCE
THEN FAILED TO RENDER YOUR REQUIRED SERVICE FOR US.
THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT, PURSUANT TO THE PROVISIONS OF
PARAGRAPH 10 OF SAID CONTRACT, WE SHALL REFUSE TO PAY YOU
ANY COMPENSATION COMMENCING AS OF MARCH 30, 1932, AND
CONTINUING THEREAFTER UNTIL YOU ARE READY, WILLING AND ABLE
TO RENDER YOUR REQUIRED SERVICES FOR US IN ACCORDANCE WITH
THE TERMS OF YOUR SAID CONTRACT....**

Buster ignored it, and did not report back for work until Thursday, 14 April. He was given a formal suspension of 13 working days for his failure to report. The legal department at MGM prepared a series of memos for Mannix, Thalberg and Mayer, outlining the contractual situation with Buster as it then existed. Keaton's contract of July 1930 was due to expire shortly: Thalberg and Mayer were concerned as to whether Speak Easily could be made in time under the terms of that contract. Buster had been returning his paychecks. Studio Manager M.E. Greenwood wrote this memo to his bosses,

'He has returned his paychecks for the five days to March 29th and for the two weeks ending April 20th and April 27th. He has given no specific reason, but I think what he has in his mind is that he will complete his next scheduled picture and then demand compensation for the suspended period. About two weeks ago he contended to me that if he made two English language pictures during the year, he was entitled to the \$150,000 irrespective of any suspensions without compensation. Under his first contract of January 26, 1928 this was true of suspensions account of incapacity, but not true as to suspensions account of refusal, but under the contract of July 9, 1930 it is not true as to any and all suspensions. He contends that the understanding was that his contract of July 9, 1930 was to have been the same in this respect as the contract of January 26, 1928. Even so refusal or failure to comply would be subject to suspension without pay....'

'It is likely that Buster's decision to refuse his paychecks was based on the advice of Jack Codd, whom he had hired as his business manager. On May fourth the three checks were sent registered mail to Codd's office in Beverly Hills. Buster refused to cash them. This line was ill advised as MGM were in the right in their refusal to pay for the time he didn't appear to work.

Buster was now regularly finishing a whole bottle of liquor a day. After Buster returned to work on on 14 April, preparations for *Speak Easily* went ahead, and shooting started on the 9th of May. The first half was shot without incident and on May 27 Thalberg authorized the payment of the money that had been withheld because of non appearances in April. On 28th, Buster was unable to shoot for two days in a row. All together, eleven days of shooting were lost. The production cost rose to \$420,000, making it the second most expensive Keaton film. Greenwood provided a memo that indicated Buster had cost the studio about \$33,000. With completion of *Speak Easily* on June 17, 1932, Buster's 1930 contract was on the verge of expiring. [Dardis. Shortened.]²¹⁶

Late on Monday afternoon I went down to the studio. I was more than half full of whiskey and ready to explode with indignation. I saw an extra girl sitting outside of the casting office. She had just finished her days work, she said. I didn't know her, had never seen her before, never saw her again, and do not know her name even now. I could not say today whether she was blonde, brunette, or a redhead.

"Have you a date tonight?" I asked her.

"No." she said.

"Do you want to come with me?"

"Yes."

I took her home with me and led her straight to the huge wardrobe in Mrs. Keaton's room. In this my wife had 150 pairs of shoes, most of which she had never put on since buying them. Also in the wardrobe were three fur coats and dozens upon dozens of frocks, house-coats, cocktail dresses and evening gowns.

"Take whatever you want." I kept saying to the bewildered little extra. Whenever she hesitated, I would say,

"Do you like these?" and yank a handful of clothes from the rack and pile them on the floor. And, "What about these nice things?" Then pile more on the floor.

Even through my alcoholic haze I could see that the girl, even as she accepted the clothes, was trying to humor me. I suppose she realized she would have to return them later on.

After a while, though, she started taking things from the rack too, possibly to placate me. But I didn't think the pile of stuff on the floor was growing fast enough. I grabbed more armfuls of dresses, underthings, stockings, and finally a mink coat.

When the pile of clothes on the floor was big enough to satisfy me, the extra girl said she didn't know where to take them.

"Don't give it a thought, my dear." I told her, "I have the solution. You and I will go a-sailing on the high seas."

I telephoned the skipper of my cruiser and told him to get everything ready as we were about to start off on a trip, maybe down the coast of Old Mexico, possibly only to Catalina.

²¹⁶[My suspicion is that the negative prices Dardis quotes are almost certainly 100% correct, but that the books he has been shown hide from half to three quarters of the profit [see pages 439-40.]

As to Buster's contract; many stars at this period refused to do any foreign language versions under similar contracts. For some reason, probably the friendliness of the Keaton/Thalberg relationship, Buster made any and all they asked for, but these are not considered extra movies, only extended shooting time to the movies they follow. It is clearly arguable that these are extra movies as stipulated by the contract [made before sound] thus entitling Buster to the higher level of bonuses. With this in mind MGM's attitude is harsh and unfriendly in my opinion, due to a breakdown of personal contact which it was clearly in MGM's best interests to fix quietly. Hounding one of their most profitable assets has to be ill advised, and bad business practice. MGM's motivation in behaving thus is only easily explicable in terms of L.B.Mayers reported antipathy.]

"Get fuel and provisions aboard and full steam up." I said.

By the time we got aboard it was eleven o'clock.

"Okay, skipper," I told the captain, "are we ready to go?"

"I can't move the boat, sir," he said, "without the owners permission."

"Your troubles are over," I said, "I give you permission to heave ho."

"You don't seem to understand, sir."

"No, I do not."

"Mrs. Keaton is the owner of the boat, and some time ago she gave strict orders that I should take it out only with her permission."

It was some time before I could grasp the point. Then I recalled taking some fool's advice when buying the insurance for the boat. This fellow said that if I registered the cruiser in my wife's name I could save 20 per cent of the insurance premium. Actors, he told me, were considered unreliable types by the underwriters. Why their wives were considered better risks he didn't explain.²¹⁷

Technically, therefore, the cruiser did not belong to me but to my wife.

I argued with the captain, made whimpering noises and tried to bribe him, but in vain. He remained as firm, steadfast, and purposeful as the boy on the burning deck.

Discouraged, I strolled over to Roland West's boat which was moored in the berth next to ours. West, a well-known screen writer and director, lived on his boat. He got out a bottle of whiskey, and I discussed the crisis with him.

"The skipper's right," he said.

"Can't I fire the captain?" I asked, "and hire someone else who doesn't know so much?"

By that time I was almost on the point of passing out. West explained that there were all sorts of papers and documents that had to be filled out before you could leave port in so large a craft.

"Well, even if I don't own the boat," I asked, mollified, "do you think I could sleep on it tonight?"

We went back to my boat to confer with the captain who made no objection. After getting aboard all of the clothes we had taken from my wife's wardrobe, the girl and I went to sleep in a cabin. And I do mean sleep. Nothing else happened.

Somebody who did not have my real interests at heart must have telephoned my wife about some of the evening's booze-inspired goings on, because she arrived on the cruiser's dock about two o'clock that morning accompanied by Constance and two private detectives and an important public official.

One of the detectives came aboard with my wife and her sister. The other sleuth remained on the dock with the official, whose purpose in joining the raiding party I never learned. It was just as well that he did not venture aboard. He had been a guest at our house many times and until that moment I had considered him a friend. Whether I was drunk or sober, I would have pushed him overboard if he had even set foot on the cruiser. I was still sore for the shabby part he had played in the San Diego fiasco. His coming round now with my wife's raiding party was to me the last straw.²¹⁸

The two ladies and the detective, after establishing the facts on which an adultery charge could be based, busied themselves gathering up all of the clothes we had removed from the house.

²¹⁷[Personal experience tells me that insurance firms treat musicians in the same way even today. It is to do with such a large proportion of those that call themselves musicians, and the same applies to actors, being unemployed. So the advice he was given was probably correct.]

²¹⁸[Who? Mannix? Or the L.A. District attorney of Blesh's account?]

"My lawyer will call on you in the morning." said my wife, and that was all she did say to me. She was hurt pretty badly, I guess. It is the only explanation I have for her subsequent actions.

I know of no woman in the world who could have taken me from Natalie- except Natalie herself. I tell you truthfully, I may not be a strong character, but I was strong enough for that.

The lawyer who called on me next morning was one of the best in the business. He brought the divorce action for my wife on July 25, 1932.

There is a community property law in California, but I refused to get a lawyer to safeguard my rights. The last thing I would claim is that I was smart about this; I was simply too stunned to put up any sort of fight.

The lawyer asked and obtained for Mrs. Keaton practically everything I had in the world. The list included our \$300,000 home in Beverly Hills, two of our three cars, about \$30,000 worth of other property I owned, \$12,000 in cash which I had in the bank, the lawyer's counsel fees, custody of the boys and \$300 a month for their support, plus \$80,000 in insurance policies on my life.

I say I was too stunned and hurt to fight. With my whole home life swept away so unfairly I just told myself, 'the hell with the money and everything else. Let her have everything she wants.' It is also true that it never occurred to me that I possibly might not continue to be a big money-maker for as long as I wished.

About all I had left when my wife obtained an interlocutory decree on August 8 were my clothes and the third car. I did not even have a place to live.

Natalie sues for divorce July 25, 1932. She employed the services of the trial lawyer Jerry Geisler. In order to obtain a clear-cut verdict of adultery against a spouse in those days it was often necessary for the wronged party to bring detectives and photographers along to record the transgression. The extra on the yacht scene provided the required evidence. To win a divorce on the grounds of adultery it was necessary for Buster to respond to the charges. He didn't, so Natalie and her lawyer had to change the charges to mental cruelty. Buster ignored it all. Under the circumstances of his default, Natalie obtained an interlocutory decree of divorce on August 9, 1932. She demanded no alimony but obtained a settlement of \$300 per month for child support, starting November 1.

After the divorce my wife immediately put the boys in an exclusive private school, the Black-Foxe Academy in Hollywood, and took a long vacation in Europe. They were spoiled enough already, I felt, without acquiring the snobbery that often rubs off on boys in that sort of school.

'On monday mornings in the early thirties, many children could be seen descending from chauffeur-driven vehicles near the intersection of Melrose and Wilcox, the site of the Black Foxe Military Academy. Founded by Earl Foxe, a leading man of the silent era, this was a weekly boarding school that was much patronized by the movie colony. The common sentiment was that it was chic to have a son in military uniform. Soon after Charles Lindbergh's son was kidnapped, however, in 1932, the limousines outside the academy gave way to anonymous-looking sedans. Kidnap fever had gripped wealthy parents from Los Feliz to Santa Monica. The two eldest Chaplin boys were students at Black Foxe.' (Gone Hollywood. Finch and Rosenkrantz.)

The divorce decree allowed me visiting privileges, which I assumed meant that I could take them out of the school for a weekend occasionally. But the first time I tried the head of the school told me that his strict orders were not to let me

take them away overnight.

Natalie immediately attempted to sell the Italian Villa, but the depression was a bad time to sell. In the spring of 1933 she succeeded in selling it to the dance team of Fanchon and Marco, with a good deal of the proceeds going to pay back taxes and other debts. Buster had paid no income tax for 1932, so Natalie agreed to have her new house attached as security for the unpaid tax bill. The new house was a small one that Constance had bought for her at Tuna Beach, as well as setting up a trust fund of \$200 per month for the rest of her life. The Tuna beach house was a summer house. Natalie then got herself a two-bedroom apartment in Santa Monica and lived there until she died in 1969.

Natalie rented the yacht to some rumrunners who operated off Catalina Island. It was intercepted by the Coast Guard on the first run but escaped in fog. Natalie was frightened so she sold it for a lot less than the \$25,000 it had cost.

Buster bought himself a small house in Cheviot Hills, adjacent to the golf course of the California Country Club. He now found it impossible to sleep and drank to get unconscious. (Dardis shortened.)

Anita Loos: 'As the silent films were drawing to their close, our lives began to take off in different directions. Norma and Dutch replaced their careers with marriages that were more or less temporary. Nate divorced Buster Keaton, and having dissipated all her energies on being a shrewish wife, spent her remaining years as a sulky divorcee. She called herself Mrs. Talmadge and legalized that name for the two sons she had by Buster.'

Do you think that's a fair comment, that she was a shrewish wife?

I never knew her, I never met her, Anita Loos did, if that's what she thought...

It's reasonable from what Myra and Louise had to say about her after the separation and everything, that she was bitter and .. I don't know.

Shortly after the divorce, I borrowed \$10,000 to buy something called a land yacht. I had read about it in a newspaper, and it seemed ideal for my purposes. I lived in it for about a year.

The land yacht originally cost \$50,000, had been built for a railroad president by the Pullman Company. It had twin motors in the chassis of a Fifth Avenue bus, contained two drawing rooms, a galley, an observation platform, and slept eight persons.

After using this fancy house on wheels for eighteen months or so the railroad executive had died, and I bought it from his widow. Even then, during the depression, it was impossible to buy much of a house for that.

I had as much fun with my land yacht as a man can whose main purpose is to forget that his whole private world has fallen apart.

One weekend, for instance, Lew Cody and I drove the land yacht to San Francisco and parked it near the Palace Hotel's main entrance. Half of the hotel staff came running out, apparently believing some wild-spending Indian potentate had arrived. The general manager asked me if I wanted my usual suite.

"Not this time." I said. "Throw down a telephone from a second storey window that we can use, and we also will want all room-service privileges. To show you that our hearts are in the right place we will pay you the regular parking fee- fifty cents a day."

They laughed and agreed. That's San Francisco for you.

We stayed there for three days, later went on hunting and fishing trips in Arizona and other Western states. My land yacht got big newspaper space everywhere we took it.

We also used it in a show put on for Franklin D. Roosevelt who had just been nominated as the 1932 Democratic presidential candidate.²¹⁹

²¹⁹[I believe this means Buster was a democrat.]



CHAPTER THIRTY.

Drinking myself to sleep every night became a habit...

1932>3.Speak Easily. What, No Beer? Grand Mills Hotel. Florida.

Louise Brooks: 'What a raw deal they gave poor Buster. When his wife divorced him, Joe Schenck made sure that he didn't own his own films, so he could never resell them. They weren't his own property, like Lloyd's or Chaplin's. He didn't have a cent. He lived in a magnificent house, on the same scale as a millionaire. But a millionaire's income comes in every year for ever. Poor Buster lived in a mansion with eight or nine servants on three thousand dollars a week. Schenck was making money out of actors, out of films, out of stories. What did it matter to him or Sam Goldwyn if they lost two thousand to four thousand dollars a week in the big bridge games? Or went to the Clover Club and lost twenty thousand? They forced the actors, like Buster, to take part because the moment you haven't any dough, you're through. You aren't brave any more. No actor could compete financially with a producer. Poor little Buster with his three thousand dollars a week, trying to live like a millionaire. It was impossible. So they broke him.'

Buster Collier: "Bridge helped to undermine his life. Bridge at two dollars a point- you could lose twenty thousand dollars in an evening. And he was a whiz, always in demand. It's a strain, anyway, playing with the Goldwyns and the Schencks- more can ride on a game than winning or losing. I recall Buster in some of those close matches taking that deep breath- the acrobat's trick- when he felt himself getting nervous. Or even going outside for air. Remember too that Lou Anger, Eddie Mannix, and financier I.C. Freud all had pieces of Buster. He was as good as syndicated. They bet on him- if he lost, they lost. I recall once, after a streak of bad cards, they sent him a picture of a funeral. He laughed, but he was upset.

Now this was the man that never had a nerve in his body- terribly athletic, terribly strong, his own stunt man, and never a better. Handle his body like a cat- throw him out of a window and he'd land on his feet. Remember, this is a guy I loved from the old vaudeville days, now shading forty and never stopping to think, I better ease up and get more rest. Even at the studio, where you work like a dog from seven A.M. to seven P.M., he had to have twelve to sixteen everyday for lunch at his bungalow.

Buster Keaton needed excitement. But deeper than that, he loved to make everybody happy, liked his gang around. So it became two drinks in the evening, then four, and then the sky's the limit. Whereupon you move it down into the daytime, and soon you have a bottle beside the alarm clock.

He was well informed and intelligent. But he was sensitive, almost abnormally so. Most people didn't know that because of the unreadable face. But Buster didn't have that hard shell of ego. As a rule, you came out of vaudeville hard as nails. Take Al Jolson or George Jessel- a sledgehammer wouldn't dent them.

I saw it begin to happen. I loved and admired the guy too much to stick around and watch it. We drifted apart. I tried to talk to him, but his gang had made a wall around him; he didn't feel like facing anything unpleasant. When he started to go, he really went.

It seemed as if it had to happen- like in his pictures- but, of course, it didn't.

What do you say about Buster Keaton?.... He was just too good a guy."

AUGUST. SPEAK EASILY.

However, Durante was very good in the one picture we made together that had quality. I think this was because the character he played was very much like the real Jimmy Durante. The picture was *Speak Easily*, which was based on a Clarence Budington Kelland story and had a sound comedy plot.

Buster didn't think *Speak Easily* was that bad, he enjoyed that one, making it. That was *Durante and Thelma Todd*. That's where he's a little professor and he gets enamoured of Thelma Todd, and they're in this *terrible* show that goes broke, and he bails them out financially and I think he winds up going to New York with them. As a whole film it's probably not that good, but there are good little sequences in there.

WHAT! NO BEER?

February. What! No Beer? Went into production on December 17, 1932. Shortly after, Thalberg has heart attack. Theaters display *Durante* above Keaton.

I knew before the camera was put up for the first scene that it was practically impossible to get a good motion picture out of it. Absolutely impossible!

The three pictures I made with *Durante* were *The Passionate Plumber*, *Speak Easily*, and *What, No Beer?* in that order. I made the last one- a 100 per cent turkey- right after my wife divorced me.

My drinking had steadily increased until I was putting away more than a bottle of whiskey a day. I was trying to drink away my sorrow and woe every night. It was the only way I could get to sleep. Drinking myself to sleep every night became a habit, and my weekends were all lost weekends. But one weekend when I absorbed unusually large amounts of whiskey I was unable to sleep at all.

I came to the studio that Monday so woozy from the lack of sleep that I hardly knew what I was doing. Somehow or other I got the crazy idea that the one thing in the world that would wake me up was a bottle of beer. I'd tried coffee and everything else that I could think of, and none of them had helped.

Instead of waking me up, of course, the beer put me to sleep. I laid down on my studio couch for a cat nap. But my exhaustion was so complete that when the assistant director came to call me to the set he couldn't rouse me. Eddie Sedgwick, who was directing, summoned doctors who worked on me and then took me home.

There was no shooting that day. For the first time in my movie career I had delayed production and cost the studio a days salary for everyone on the picture²²⁰. I naturally assumed that nothing would be done about this single dereliction of mine. Every other star on the lot had caused them many such losses. I was also the only M-G-M star who had never failed to show up for work on time. Unlike Gilbert, Garbo, and most of the others I was never temperamental, never refused to do anything required of me, including the most hazardous stunts in my pictures.

Since talkies had made necessary the remaking of each picture in Spanish, French, and German, I was the only star at M-G-M who would do all three foreign versions when the original picture was finished.

I rarely heard of the other M-G-M stars agreeing to do more than one of these foreign versions. The remake chore, of course, was easier on me than on dramatic performers who spoke a great many more lines in each picture.

My working on all foreign versions of my pictures saved the company a fortune, which was an additional reason, in my opinion, for the front office to overlook my beer-drinking error. And that seemed to be the way the big brass also felt. When the

²²⁰[Buster is mistaken here, see above.]

picture was finished M-G-M sent me to Arrowhead Springs to dry out in the sulphur caves there for four days- and picked up the check.²²¹

'New contract, August. Contained a pay back system for losses on Speak Easily. Salary still \$3,000 per week, but \$600 per week taken out until the \$33,000 repaid. Buster thought this fair. Greenwood noted that Keaton 'has been very amiable and is leaving it to us to be considerate as well as equitable.' However MGM was no longer obliged to star him. The profit sharing arrangements between MGM and Buster Keaton Productions were now in abeyance. He was truly just another employee.' (Dardis.)

It was my hard luck also to be engaged just then in a ridiculous controversy with Louis B. Mayer. A short while before the god-awful *What, No Beer?*²²² I'd been invited to act as mascot for the St. Mary's football team, then one of the best elevens in the country, during its big game of the season, the one with the UCLA Bruins. The invitation meant that I could sit on the bench with the team during the game. I was thrilled as a child and said I would be there come hell or high weather.

I should have added 'unless Louis B. Mayer has other plans for me'. This proved to be the case. For some years Mr. Mayer had been indulging himself in a fairly harmless but annoying bit of hocus-pocus on Saturday afternoons in the alleged interest of the studio's public relations.

He liked to get his stars- and Mr. Mayer never thought of us as anything else but his stars- to make fake movie scenes for small groups of visitors from out-of-town. It could be a gang of welfare workers from Des Moines, a convention of beer salesmen, Lincoln (Nebraska) schoolteachers on a spree, or the members of a trade association. No matter what the group was or where it came from, Mr. Mayer liked to send instructions to the various companies that were working on the lot to plan some fake scenes, because in those early days of sound, a whisper on a sound stage recorded like a war whoop.

On the day before the great St. Mary's-UCLA game Mr. Mayer sent word through his secretary I was to be in the studio at two o'clock next day to do my stuff for some sixty members of something or other.

I sent back word that much as I regretted it I could not be there. As I hung up I noticed that some of our crew had already begun to put a set up, a set specially for the visitors, and were furnishing it.

A few minutes later there was an ultimatum:

"Mr. Mayer says to be there."

²²¹[A mysterious four days indeed. Either Buster or Charlie Samuels is confused, probably Buster, who says that he made this mistake during *What, No Beer?*, 1933, and came back to find they had bought the story to *Sidewalks of New York*, 1931. There are a number of explanations for this anomaly, but the most probable, in my opinion, is that the four days in the cave happened just before *Sidewalks of New York*, and that Buster had another visit to the same cure after the 'beer drinking error', and has simply mixed the two visits up in his mind. This confusion would not be all that surprising considering the reason for the visits. The combination of ideas between *Sidewalks of New York*,/ *What, No Beer*,/ his divorce and demise as a movie star, seem indissolubly connected in Buster's mind; certainly he feels that both films were inexcusable and he probably drank all the deeper as a result. The other explanations range from Buster's lifelong inability to remember names to little green men tampering with *My Wonderful World of Slapstick*..]

²²²[Changed from *Sidewalks of New York* to fit the story. Unless this St. Mary's/UCLA Bruins game can be dated this is my only choice. See above.]



"I can't." I answered, and St. Mary's beat the Bruins that Saturday 14-7. I enjoyed being mascot, but on Monday when I arrived at the studio there was a letter on my dressing table. It read,

'Your services at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios are no longer required'. It was signed, Louis B. Mayer, General Manager and Vice-President'.

Though my contract at the studio had several months to run I did not consult a lawyer about the matter. Once again I felt too sick and hurt and crushed to do anything at all about my legal rights. I certainly could have obtained a settlement even though technically M-G-M may have had the right to discharge me for causing the What, No Beer? company to miss a whole day's shooting.

Stupid not to have done this? Of course. But by that time I was drinking more than a bottle of whiskey a day which neither improved my mental processes nor lessened my sense of humiliation.

Sam Marx: "The trailer was moved to the far western side of the MGM studio and was a place of constant parties; and finally Mayer had it drawn to his attention. Now Mayer was a highly moral man no matter what people may say about him and he did not want what could be a potential scandal erupting within the studio lot, because they were having a lot of girls show up, there was a tremendous lot of drinking and there was probably some gambling; so consequently Mayer sent Eddie Mannix, who was a [the] studio manager to go down there and stop all the carousing. But unfortunately Mannix was one who joined in half the time, so it was not exactly the right thing to send a firebug to put out a fire. After Mayer realized that Eddie wasn't getting anywhere he went down himself and he had a tremendous confrontation there with Buster. He finally reached a point where Buster ordered him out of the trailer, and Mayer ordered him out of the studio. And that was the final exit of Buster Keaton as far as... in the production of movies at the studio. And I always thought that Buster had a wonderful exit line because he said,

"You studio people warped my character!"

which was literally true of course. He couldn't make the kind of movies he wanted to make."

Raymond Rohauer: "L.B. Mayer hated Keaton! Keaton always said that L.B. Mayer was the worst enemy he had, at the studio."

'You are hereby notified that for good and sufficient cause we hereby terminate the contract with you dated October 5, 1932.

Yours very truly,

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER CORPORATION

By Louis B. Mayer

Vice President. Written on the bottom of the carbon copy 'Served on Keaton by Lou Edelman and Frank Davis about noon Feb. 2, 1933'. (Dardis.)

February 23, 1933. The Daily Express: 'Talk of the Talkies. BUSTER KEATON SAYS 'AU REVOIR' After the pending presentation of his latest comedy 'What! No Beer?', Buster Keaton will vanish from the screen for months, maybe a year, or even longer.

His association with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer company has ended.

It was under this studio's banner that Buster won all his greatest successes of the last few years.

He was responsible for his own production*. Little, if any, interference came from the caliphs who sit on high*²²³.

Announcing plans for a long holiday embracing Central and South America... Poor Buster! I don't expect his bank balance totals a cent more than \$250,000.²²⁴

²²³[These falsehoods, marked *, are clearly inspired by MGM.]

²²⁴[I'd be surprised if it was much over \$25,000.]

Gil Perkins, stuntman: "I suppose we loved him almost as much as any actor I can think of. Buster was one of the real greats, not only in his own field, but as a guy to work with, and be with. Naturally, when a man is easy to work with, and has great skill, and great understanding, you think he's one of the greatest guys in the world. And he was!"

It seems to me that the crux of the problem was that MGM hired a comedy actor and not a film maker.

Yes, and you can't really say they hired him, they got him by default because Joe dumped him there. And the fact that Louis B. Mayer was the head of the studio and hated comics, never liked Buster, ever, no matter whether Buster's films were good or bad he didn't like him. He did everything in his power to get rid of him, he finally did. He wanted Buster to go and do some kind of dumb publicity, and Buster was already committed to go sit on the bench with the U.S.C. football team, some sporting thing. And he went and did his football thing instead and that was the straw that broke the camel's back and got him fired. Louis B. Mayer just hated comics and Buster just happened to be in the line of fire, I guess. He finally got rid of him, with Buster's help I might add.

Until Buster's drinking got serious, that last couple of years, Mayer only disliked him because he was a comic, it wasn't necessarily anything personal. Mayer just didn't have any sense of humor whatsoever and he saw no sense in comedy or comics. The only thing relating to a comedian they had had was Billy Haines who did light frothy drawing room type things. So Buster was the first real comic they'd had on the lot, and it was over Mayer's dead body so to speak, Nicholas Schenck says, 'He's here. I got him from my brother and he's here.' and because Mayer's boss was Nick Schenck, there was nothing Mayer could do about it, and he had to behave himself until Buster gave him a good excuse not to.

Equally Mayer was being fairly difficult on various of Buster's projects...

...but I think he probably knew enough not to go so far that Buster would squawk to Nick, or squawk to Joe and it would get back to Nick, because after all Joe was still his brother-in-law and his friend at that time.

How much influence do you think it would have had on Mayer that all Buster's movies were making a lot of money?

That might have had something to do with it too.

But they were still making money when they fired him...

Uhuh.

So basically you're saying they fired him just because of the drinking?

Yes. I guess he always more or less got to work on time and did what he was supposed to, I don't know, but basically he didn't do as he was told outside of working hours. They always had things they wanted their stars to do, and Buster wouldn't do 'em. Buster had his own baseball team, all the guys on the lot, and they used to play other studios, and they used to play semi-pro amateur league baseball teams. and they used to always do that on Saturdays and Sundays, and Mayer started lining up things for Buster to do on Saturday afternoon. And Buster says,

"No, I have a baseball game." and Buster went and played baseball, and he wouldn't do all these little things that Mayer thought he should, whatever they were, I don't know. So that was a big thorn in Mayer's side. One of them I know was Buster got to go sit on the bench with the USC Football team, which was a big, big deal to him or anybody else that was allowed to do that, and that may have been the straw that broke the camel's back because that was also a day that Mayer wanted him to do something.

It just seems strange to me that regardless of Buster's condition and whatever Mayer felt about him, that a man whose movies are making that much money during the depression should be fired.

Well, Mayer and his little group or whatever should have had enough, I won't say compassion, but enough common horse sense to not antagonise him and drive him further into a depression than he already was. Should have left him alone to make his movies and not try to force him to do all these other odds and ends that he *hated*. But they weren't worried or thinking about anything like that. They had plenty of people and plenty of stars that would have knocked each other down to make these appearances, for the sake of their ego. Buster didn't happen to be one of them and they didn't even consider that, that they had enough other people to do those things. Anyway, I don't know.²²⁵

1933

When Roscoe died in 1933 he was making two-reel comedies for Warner Brothers at their Flatbush studio. But these also lacked the quality and inspired comic flavor of his old pictures.

The day I heard Roscoe was dead I recalled a little incident which reveals just how much of a monster my old friend was. It happened when we were making our last two-reeler in New York. We were going down to Coney Island that day to make some scenes on the beach. Roscoe told Lou Anger we needed a pretty girl who would look good in a bathing suit.

A casting call was sent out, and Roscoe selected from the crowd a sixteen-year-old blonde. On the day we were going to Coney Island, she walked into Roscoe's dressing room and turned around so he could admire her in her bathing suit.

"That's fine," he told her and turned away.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Arbuckle." she said. "I brought another one along with me. Maybe you'll like this one better." She unwrapped the second suit, shut the door, and started to take off the suit and put on the other. Before she got very far with her strip-tease act, Roscoe left her on the run. He busted into the dressing room I shared with Al St. John and told us what was going on. At his insistence Lou Anger got another girl for the role.

Yes, this was what the man denounced as a sex fiend by the press, public, and pulpit was really like. The story also illustrates pretty well, I think, to what length certain teen-age girls were ready to go to get into the movies even in pre-World War I days.

Yet even in this tragedy of the funny fat man there is one heartwarming note. Hollywood, the 'town where love is unknown', 'the town which can keep no secret', never let the outside world know who 'William B. Goodrich' was until it could not hurt Roscoe Arbuckle.²²⁶

Joe Schenck: "All who have ever known the real Roscoe Arbuckle will always treasure the memory of the great, generous heart of the man, a heart big enough to embrace in its warmth everyone who came to him for help, stranger and friend alike.

It was this quality which led to his downfall, after he had struggled from poverty to fame in which the children throughout the world worshipped him. Those who knew him for the great artist he was, admired him. His was the

²²⁵[Blesh, p. 325-6 tells how Buster gets injured at a Christmas party after *What, No Beer?* was completed, followed by two other 'convulsions' over the next year, described as "these convulsions look like a frenzy of grief" by Dr. Shuman. However, the way it is fitted in to 1933 makes the whole surrounding detail of the story impossible to fit to the chronology.]

²²⁶[Quite obviously this is the same story as is told in greater detail and colloquialism at Coney Island, earlier in the text. The essentials are the same, only details differ. The reader must choose which they prefer.]

tragedy of a man born to make the world laugh and to receive suffering as his reward. And to the end he held no malice." [Yallop, 366-7.]

Shortly after I was thrown out I did something even more stupid. I had a chance to come back and refused to accept it. That happened this way:

While I was making my last picture or two at M-G-M the company was producing its fabulous all-star picture 'Grand Hotel' with most of the lot's great stars in the cast. Among them were Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, John and Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery, and Jean Hersholt.

One day Edmund Goulding, who was directing it, sent for me. There was an important and serious role in the picture that he had a crazy hunch I could play. It was the part of the man who knows he is dying and wishes, in the last few months of his life, to make up for all of the fun and gay times he has missed.

Any actor would; I told Eddie his hunch was not crazy at all. I was sure I could handle such a serious role.

"In almost every picture I've made," I explained, "I make it a rule to become very serious about the fourth reel or so. That is to make absolutely sure that the audience will really care about what happens to me in the rest of the picture." I suggested he re-run some of my old pictures in a projection room and he could see that for himself.

I heard nothing more about this, and Lionel Barrymore, of course, got the role. Lionel, as usual, handled himself masterfully even though I would have played the part differently. I do not say better, mind you, just differently. Even being considered by Goulding for the straight dramatic role, however, was a compliment. It also started me thinking about that picture. After I saw it, I got one of the best travesty ideas of my life and told Eddie Sedgwick about it.

The scene for this take-off on 'Grand Hotel' would be New York City's famous old Mills Hotel, the down-and-outer's hangout near the Bowery, which then was renting its best rooms for fifty cents a night.

Now Marie Dressler, [laughs] will do Garbo's part. Marie will be a superannuated ballet dancer. She leaves the theater in a huff, throws a fur coat over her costume, and comes home in a limousine. All alone, she takes off the coat and pauses before a cheval glass. Eddie and I almost got hysterical thinking of what Marie Dressler would do with the opening scene. She would look into the full-length mirror, open her ankle-length ermine robe, exposing her battleship of a figure in ballet dancer's costume with slippers about a foot and a half long, and murmur,

"I think I am getting too old to dance. I fear that my public doesn't want me any more."

Jimmy Durante I saw as perfect in John Barrymore's role of the bogus count. The love interest will be between Durante and Dressler. Instead of making love to Greta Garbo as the aging ballerina, he would have Marie Dressler in his arms.

I wanted to play Lionel Barrymore's part:- with a few changes, of course. His role is the man given only a few weeks to live and trying to see life, before he dies of consumption. The doctor in my crucial scene would pronounce me suffering from hiccups and declare that I had but thirty or forty years to live.

"Only thirty or forty years?" I would exclaim, "That means I must not lose a single moment." And I'd order champagne and caviar, dancing girls, and a gipsy orchestra sent up to my suite at once.

In your original, Wally Beery is a manufacturer trying to make some giant merger. I planned to have Oliver Hardy play the part of the lustful, power-mad manufacturer-but Oliver Hardy makes only front collar buttons and is trying to arrange a merger with Stan Laurel, who makes only back collar buttons. *They* want to merge.

Polly Moran would play the hotel secretary, Joan Crawford's role in the original, and in the scene in which Oliver Hardy seduces Polly I hoped to hit one of the comic high spots of the decade.

In 'Grand Hotel' Jean Hersholt had the poignant role of the hotel clerk who is frantic with worry because his wife is having a baby. Henry Armetta would be our room clerk, but what is giving him the willies is the ordeal of his cat, who is expecting kittens in the cellar. That's *his* problem.

You know that Heidelberg duelling scar that Lewis Stone has on his cheek? Well, in my Grand Mills Hotel, Edward Everett Horton has a band-aid- cut himself while shaving.

Just as in Grand Hotel, we all have our problems at the Mills Hotel.

We also discussed the advantages. We could use many of the Grand Hotel sets, and most of the players were on M-G-M's contract list, so it would neither be troublesome nor expensive to line them up.

"I'll even use their script." I added.

"Let them release this parody of 'Grand Hotel' six months after their big picture is released," I told Sedgwick, "and I'll bet anyone on the M-G-M lot anything from a Ford to a Cadillac that my take-off will outgross their all-star movie."

One day, some time after I was fired by M-G-M, Eddie Sedgwick, grinning like some kid, came to see me. He said he had told Irving Thalberg about my 'Grand Hotel' take-off, and that Thalberg wanted to make it.

"He can't make it." I said. "It doesn't belong to M-G-M. It belongs to me."

"Irving knows that." Eddie replied. "That is what he wants to talk to you about."

"Where?"

"In his office, of course."

"I can't go back to M-G-M," I said, "Thalberg should know that. I'm in no shape to go back."

That wasn't my real reason, of course. After being kicked out that way I had made up my mind that I would never walk on that lot again until Louis B. Mayer invited me to. It was also true that I was in no shape to go back. In no mental shape, that is.

But I was a fool, and I admit it. For Irving Thalberg, with the chips down, was willing to fight for me. Aside from Norma Shearer, his wife, I think I was his favorite M-G-M star. He appreciated my work more than that of any of the Barrymores, Garbos, Crawfords, and Mickey Rooneys there.

Everything might have been different if I had gone back. Doing a picture I was so eager to do might have enabled me to stop drinking and re-establish myself as a man whose only business was making people laugh.

Eddie Sedgwick, like any successful director, was a master of persuasion. Yet he could not talk me that day into doing the sensible thing and eating humble pie.

So nothing ever came of that bright notion. If it had, I think I would have won the bet of anything from a Ford to a Cadillac that our parody would have outgrossed the original, even though 'Grand Hotel' earned millions for M-G-M in 1932, a year when the world was wondering if it could ever get back on its economic feet.

He always said that he and Irving Thalberg wanted to do that Grand Mills Hotel badly, and they wouldn't allow it, because it was a take-off of 'Grand Hotel', and it was within six months of it being a smash hit, and Louis B. Mayer, and Nick Schenck and whoever else the high brass were, they wouldn't allow it. Thalberg and Buster thought it was a wonderful idea, and they had it all cast, Marie

Dressler was the Greta Garbo retired ballerina part, and anyway, they had that whole thing just wonderfully laid out, just listening to it sounds hysterical, because it was all the top stars, they didn't have to hire anybody, all these people were the top stars of MGM and were there. But, they weren't allowed to do it.

But that, to me, was what made Blesh's version of the story so hard to credit. It seems too perfect, after having been sacked and going through, well, personal de-tox, that then they send back and say, 'You can do it.' and he tells them to 'Stuff it!'

He'd have been over there with his shoes in his hand, not taking time to put 'em on, he'd have been so excited over it.

So your opinion is, 'This cannot have happened.'?

I don't think so, because he used to tell that story to people occasionally, and talking about the casting and how wonderful it would have been, and this and that and the other thing.

So he never told you that anyone ever told him he could do it and he told them to shove it?

No. Anytime I ever heard him mention it, he talked about it being something he'd always wanted to do.

Would you say that 'Hollywood worships success'[Hedda Hopper] is a truism?

Yes.

In what way did that impinge on Buster's career once MGM had managed to make him not a success?

Well, in worshipping success, that almost exclusively means money, and I would imagine, I don't know, but those last couple of pictures Buster made at MGM were so horrendous I can't imagine them making any money.

They did.

Well, I don't know then, but most always it means money, or how many jobs you get. If you had six offers to make a film during the year, or only one, there's another difference.

So you're saying that the worship of success is actually the worship of money. If, as the Bible says 'the love of money is the root of all evil', do you think therefore that Hollywood could be described as an evil place?

A lot of it is, particularly when you're dealing with the high brass and the guys that have the money. I don't know how evil, but they're ruthless.

Hedda Hopper: 'The lure of the almighty dollar brings two categories of people to our community, those who work and those who prey. Like Hamelin before the pied piper we are infested with rodents from bookies to con-men, from mobsters to panderers, anxious to supply anything a paying customer calls for. The difference between us and Hamelin is that we've given up hoping for the piper.'

Fair comment?

Uhuh. She was a very bright lady, and had a way with words. She also knew where all the bodies were buried so she didn't have a problem with libel, (laughs) when she wanted to tell the truth, she did; and if she didn't, she ignored it.

She claims she always told nothing but the truth..

But she also was smart enough to know when to keep her mouth shut.

Hedda Hopper mentions gangsters. At what point did they move in?

The thing is they didn't mean anything in Hollywood, except socially. They had no influence, they had no money in films, they didn't mean anything. The closest the big ganster mafia mob type people ever got is Las Vegas, and that wasn't until after the war.

But they are in the unions..

Yes, but that's no big thing. In other words, they had no control over film.

They had never infiltrated the studios. They probably knew how to run a union properly, probably why they were into that. The first year the screen actors guild came into being which was union was 1936 and I joined the very first year. All of us that were working at the time did, and there was very few unions before that. There's more now.

Losing out at M-G-M made me poison at the other major Hollywood studios. None of them seemed to want or need me. I don't know what wild rumors went around about my unreliability and alcoholism. But in that tightly knit one-industry town there were then seven major studios in a position to spend the sort of money my comedies cost. No offers came from the other six: Paramount, Columbia, Warner Brothers, Universal, Fox, or RKO.²²⁷

So I was jubilant when I got an offer from Florida where Mickey Neilan had just made a picture called *Chloe* and wanted to make another with me. Lew Lipton, a comedy writer who had worked with me, was with Neilan, and this gave me added reassurance. I was going to be paid \$3,000 a week, my M-G-M salary. Financing was being supplied by a group of Coca-Cola distributors and other businessmen. They had hopes of establishing Florida as a film-making center.

'A few months later he [Marshall Neilan] got financing, reportedly from Coca-cola interests, for a film shot at the Sun Haven Studio's in St. Petersburg, Florida. '*Chloe*' was embarrassingly bad, almost amateurish, with a ridiculous story laid in the everglades. Olive Borden, debilitated by the alcoholism that led to her death, had the lead and frequently held up production... '*Chloe*' got only a few bookings on the states rights market. Neilan then got together a New York group headed by hotelman Jack Bergen to do a screen version of Otto Soglow's newspaper cartoon, '*The Little King*'. Buster Keaton, who was also at a low ebb, came on from Hollywood to do the lead, and the company left for Havana for exteriors. A revolution exploded in Cuba and the project was abandoned.²²⁸ [From '*Marshall Neilan*.' By Jack Spears.]

I was in very high spirits as I flew to St. Petersburg where Neilan and Lew Lipton met my plane. Getting three thousand miles from the scene of my worst defeats was exhilarating. I was determined to stay off the booze, do a great job, and show everyone that I was anything but a dead duck.

I arrived in Florida in the spring of 1933, just when the hot weather was beginning to drive the tourists home. I had a story that seemed sound, and in no time we were ready to start shooting. But the weather made that impossible. I say this even after having made pictures on the Arizona desert where the heat was almost as oppressive. But in Arizona the air was dry. In soggy Florida it was not enough to put ice on top of the camera to keep the emulsion from melting off the film. We also had to keep cold air blowers going all the time on both sides of the camera. It was so hot down there that it was impossible for Molly O'Day, the leading lady, to keep the make-up on her face.

Yet we might have managed somehow if it hadn't been for the insects. They really finished us. Dragon flies, mosquitoes which seemed to have teeth, kept zooming in swarms between the actors and the camera. It was impossible to get a clean shot even with the blowers going.

None of this discouraged our optimistic backers. But I told them the truth when I became convinced that they were only throwing their money away in trying to establish a year-round movie industry there. Among other things, I pointed out that for years they would have the additional heavy expense of transporting everything they needed, from costumes to actors, from New York.

²²⁷[Buster politely skirts round the issue of United Artists.]

²²⁸[His second revolution in three years.]

They listened, paid off, and I was out of another job. Why could I be such a good salesman then? The project had been widely publicized, so what I got from it was a couple of weeks' pay and another failure on my record. ²²⁹

A lot of people have said, and I'm sick of reading it, that Buster had run out of creative potential by the time MGM started running the show, insofar as he could no longer play the juvenile and all that that entailed. My opinion is that he could doubtless have made the transition into the adult version of his character, what's your opinion?

Well he did. He did do it, if not in.. well of course he did it in film too as he got older. He never played it as a juvenile anyway, it was an ageless character, but as he got older I think he worked the same way. When he was sixty-five if he saw a beautiful girl on the screen he'd fall madly in love in the blink of an eye the same as he did when he was twenty. I don't think he ever changed his attitude or the way he did things. The way he worked. In looking at the films, even the MGM films, I was never aware of him aging that much, the make-up changed, because in the early days they wore this real white white face make-up to compensate for the bad film and the bad lighting, because you could see they never bothered to make-up their hands, when he'd put his hands up he'd look like he was wearing brown gloves with a white face, with the better lighting and the change in make-up it might account for him looking different but I don't really think he looked that much older until he got into that last couple of MGM films when he was drinking.

The one thing I remember Buster saying about his own character was that he was so innocent that if he kissed a girl she would immediately become pregnant. (Laughs) That's how innocent he was. But he wasn't childlike like Harry Langdon, he was just a naive 18, 19, 20 year old type person. Of course, Chaplin would have been totally adult, because he was sexual ... Harold Lloyd was a teenager type person too, the way he worked. ²³⁰

How did Buster feel about Lloyd and Chaplin socially?

They were all casual friends, but none of them were very close to each other I don't believe, but they were good friends, never any arguments or problems. Of course, Harold Lloyd was the first one to admit that the only reason he did funny things was because somebody else wrote them for him and gave them to him. He was the businessman. He was a good businessman, but his comedy was purely written and handed to him, and he had a knack of doing it, but he wasn't creative at all, and he always said that of himself, according to Buster.

²²⁹ [Information just to hand from The Keaton Chronicle suggests that the reasons were also of a financial nature, and as the whole operation was closed some months later by the IRS this seems likely. Working title of the film is given as 'The Fisherman', and the only surviving publicity still suggests the story, by Keaton and Lipton, was similar to 'The Invader'. Buster was highly publicly visible in St. Petersburg during the period from late May, 1933 until late July, joining a local baseball team etc.]

²³⁰ ["I don't feel qualified to talk about my work."

'Buster Keaton. 1964.' Dardis.P.102. No provenance is given, nor have I located any; if it is bona fide I presume Buster was talking about his work with reference to Art, as defined by the critics. Compare to the following, "Slapstick comedy has a format, but it is hard to detect in its early stages unless you are one of those who can create it. The unexpected was our staple product, the unusual our object, and the unique was the ideal we were always hoping to achieve." This does not sound like the words of a man who doesn't feel qualified to talk about his work, and it's provenance is impeccable.'

Hal Roach [Lloyd's director/producer/partner]: "Harold Lloyd was not a comedian, but he was the best actor to act the part of a comedian of any person I ever saw."

And of course Chaplin was *the* great film comic of the world, Buster always said that.

Sam Goldwyn and I had a run-in one evening when we were partners in a bridge game. My cards were bad, and he became quite abusive.

When I'd taken all I cared to, I pointed out that when he was playing with Schenck, Louis B. Mayer, and other big shots he managed to control his temper quite well. I told him he could control it now.

My cards continued to be bad and so did his abuse.

"Do you want me to force the cards?" I asked. "Or do you want me to break this bridge table over your head?"

"Oh, now you are a table-thrower?" he said. The game ended when Frances, his wife, fearing we would come to blows, came to the door of the room with Sam's hat and coat in her hands.

This was soon after the breakup of my first marriage. I never played bridge with Sam Goldwyn again. I do not think I saw him again until the day when I was down and out and needed work badly. This was no secret in Hollywood, and I was grateful when Sam's secretary phoned me to say that her boss wanted to see me about a part in a picture he was making about John L. Sullivan, the old bare-knuckle champion.

When I got to his office at the appointed time the secretary told me,

"Oh yes, Mr. Goldwyn is waiting to see you." I walked in, Goldwyn looked up.

After staring at me for quite a while, he shook his head.

"I had this part in a picture that I thought you could do, Buster," he said, "but now I see you I realize I was wrong. You'd never be able to do it."

I do not know what Sam expected me to do, leap at his throat or get down on my knees and beg for the part. But he did not expect me to do what I did: laugh and walk out.

I suppose Sam felt as foolish that day as I did on a certain Sunday in 1926. I was sitting alone on the porch of Bebe Daniel's beach home when I noticed that a girl out in the rough surf seemed to be having trouble. The breakers kept rolling in, knocking her down. Every time she managed to get to her feet another big wave would come in and bowl her over.

Just to be on the safe side I went out there to help her get safely to shore. As it turned out, she got in all right on her own. As we came out of the water Bebe ran down to us and asked,

"Have you two met?"

When I said no, she said to the girl,



"This is Buster Keaton," and to me, "Buster, this is Gertrude Ederle. You've read about her. She swam the English Channel a couple of weeks ago."



Robert Keaton (8). Buster Keaton.
Jimmy Keaton (9).

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE.

The chapter I hate to write.

1933-36. Invader. Roi de Champs Elysees. Cheaters.

The two worst years of my life were from 1933 to 1935. During those two bad years I made feature movies in Mexico, England, and France.

I really started to hit the bottle hard after returning from Florida, and in a short while I had a bad case of the d.t.'s. I do not know why I say bad case, as I never have heard of a good case of delirium tremens.

Louella Parson's husband, the late Dr. Harry Martin, who was an old friend of mine, sent me to Arrowhead Springs for renewed drying out and Sulphur-cave treatments. I was accompanied by a young physician, associated with him, and a nurse.

When we returned, Dr. Martin was not satisfied with my condition and insisted that the nurse remain with me a couple of weeks longer to make sure I completed the cure. She had her orders of just the right amount of whiskey to give me so I wouldn't go nuts, also hypodermics to put me to sleep.

I was living in a little Culver City bungalow. It was a restful enough place with a rear porch facing the pleasant greens of the California Country Club's golf course, but it didn't rest me. Something about being so close to the studio I'd been kicked out of made me fret and brood.

I was able to endure just a week of living there. Then I told the nurse I wanted to go to Mexico. When she protested that her orders from Dr. Martin required her to stay close by me I told her she could come along.

I ran away to Mexico, but it didn't solve anything, of course. About all that happened there was another marriage which got world-wide publicity because a full year had not elapsed since my interlocutory decree from my first wife became final. When that came through there was another marriage ceremony at Ventura, California. That second marriage of mine did not last long, which is the nicest thing about it I remember.

Weds Mae Scribbens. At Ensenada, California on January 8, 1933. And a second time at Ventura on October 17.

He had to go to Mexico City for some public appearance type thing, I don't know what it was, it wasn't necessarily his own idea, and his doctor insisted that he take her, because she was a nurse assigned to him to keep him from drinking, I guess, and she hauled him into Mexico and married him while he was drunk. He probably didn't know he'd been married for two or three days or something. Anyway, she announced to the press and everybody that they were there to get married, so being a stupid idiot that he was, since it hit the press all over the United States and everywhere else, he felt obligated to go through with it. So when they got back from that trip he sneaked her up to Ventura, and they got married again. I never knew exactly the time element on the whole thing, but as close as I could ever figure it I don't think the whole thing lasted nine months.

Income for 1932. \$147,300.

Income for 1933 \$47,400. He was facing suits for unpaid bills, including unpaid federal income taxes of \$28,00. He declared bankruptcy, listing liabilities of \$308,832 and assets of \$13,000. Gradually he repaid everything he owed, with Harry Keaton handling his financial affairs for him.[Dardis.]

1934

Lew Cody dies.

Anita Loos: 'A few weeks before Peg died of cancer in 1934, I had an opportunity to visit her in a Hollywood hotel room. Sitting at her bedside, I remembered the fears she used to harbor about her daughter's futures, but I now realized her mind was at rest. For Joe Schenck had survived Norma's betrayal and was standing faithfully by to watch after all the girl's investments. Peg's last days were untroubled, thanks to her loyal son-in-law.

Of all Hollywood's heroes, on screen and off, my favorite is Joe Schenck. There once came a time when a certain partner of Joe's was threatened with jail over a tax evasion; Joe stepped forward and took the rap, his argument being that he had no children who would suffer from the disgrace, whereas his partner was a family man. Joe was sentenced to two years. He wrote me from prison to say, 'Don't worry about me. I'm working in the library and doing fine'.'

It seemed to me that I heard Buster talking about it to some other guy, I think Joe was the patsy, he went to jail protecting half a dozen different other people that were involved along with him, but he took the total blame to protect them.²³¹

The following year I went abroad to make two pictures. While I was away Natalie obtained a court order changing our boys' last name from Keaton to Talmadge.

The first I heard about this was when I returned. I knew that the court order would be revoked if I appealed, for I had never been served with any papers in the case.

But it was something I wanted to think over. Natalie's family had a lot of money--a great, great pile. My boys were the only children in the family, and it meant a lot to my in-laws to perpetuate their name. I knew my sons would be left all of this fortune someday if I did not make any legal moves to change their name back to Keaton.

I did not want to do anything to lose them that chance of becoming rich. I was not sure that I would ever have a dime to leave them.

LE ROI DES CHAMPS ELYSEES. NERO FILM.

Released in France by Paramount.

William K. Everson.'...Rudi Blesh dismisses the film as 'poor', but says nothing more about it, a pretty clear indication that he never saw it, and that Keaton himself was not very informative about it...It is not in all honesty a major film, [but] *should* be better known and that 'poor' label washed off and supplanted by a more accurate description. For it is quite an amusing film, fast paced, in many ways more satisfying than Keaton's last MGM talkies, and above all, fairly typical Keaton material. It is also so thoroughly visual that the French language is virtually no handicap, and it is surprising that the film wasn't picked up at least by an independent distributor in the early 30's.

Keaton does seem to have had some control over the content of the gags, and the way in which they are handled. As in all of his films, some of the subtlest gags are almost throwaways...

Most of the gags are handled, as was Keaton's manner, in long and medium shots, so that one is always aware of the relationship of the character and the gag to the situation at hand.

²³¹[Yallop: 'On behalf of a number of studio heads, Schenck made pay-offs of \$50,000 a year to union racketeers Willie Biof and George Browne who controlled the stagehands union. Over the years, these payments were covered up by the studio accounting departments. Finally Biof and Browne were exposed and convicted, largely because of Schenck's cooperation with the government. Schenck himself was convicted of lying about his income tax returns and served over four months in prison before President Harry S. Truman granted him a full pardon. Throughout his ordeal, Hollywood stood firmly behind him; he in turn remained discreet about who contributed to the union 'war chest'.' shortened. P. 370.]

Frankly, the film moves a little too fast for Keaton. There isn't time to build, and then follow through with the echo-gag. Some potentially very funny bits of business just aren't developed nearly as well as they might have been....

The dream-like quality- the disruption of time and space- so typical of Keaton's films, seems designed to be absent on this occasion. Yet almost subliminally it creeps in, as though no force could keep it out...

Undeniably, *Le Roi des Champs Elysees* is an economical production, but not a cheap one. In terms of slick and serviceable sets, glossy photography and overall production values, it does far better by Keaton than his British feature 'The Invader', released in the US as 'An Old Spanish Custom'...

The spectacular falls without doubles are well in evidence, though to no great comic result. However, worthy of note is the deliberate, beaming smile that Buster bestows on his girl (the charming Paulette Goddard) for the fadeout.²³² It's almost as though Keaton envisioned this as his last film and wanted to write *Finis* to his character, to leave him traditionally happy without those bitter little twists that he so often brought to the final scenes of his best silent features.'

Early in 1934, when I was flat broke, I received an offer of \$15,000 from a French producer to make a picture in Paris. The producer sent me nothing for travelling expenses, and to get there with my second wife I had to sell \$350 worth of War Savings Bonds which I had been hanging onto ever since my Army days. It proved barely enough to get us to Europe in the cheapest way I could find: on a freighter travelling from Los Angeles to Glasgow, Scotland, via the Panama Canal.

After landing in Scotland we traveled to London and stopped overnight at the Grand Palace Hotel. There was a wonderful surprise waiting there for me, a letter from Joe Schenck with a \$1,000 check in it. He wrote that this covered my share of the sale of some leftover equipment at the Keaton studio.

I could not remember any leftover equipment and suspected this was Joe's tactful way of extending a helping hand. I was in no position to question this. It had come in the nick of time to pay pressing bills in Hollywood.

Somehow I have always found it impossible to borrow money from anyone. Perhaps the fact that I've paid my own way since I was four has something to do with this. Some sort of crazy pride even prevented me from asking friends to return money I had loaned them back in my \$3,000-a-week days.

When I went broke, I had \$15,000 in personal debts outstanding, not counting the tens, twenties and fifties every star in show business is expected to hand out to down-and-outers as a matter of course.

Some of the friends I had loaned solid amounts to never got into a position where they could pay. It was that way with Arbuckle, who died owing me \$2,500, and with Lew Cody, who died owing me \$2,000.

But there were several others, including a cowboy star, a prominent comedian, and a pal who inherited a fortune,²³³ who could have paid me but never came near me.

²³²[He smiled !?!? Apparently so: 'Contrary to popular belief, Buster Keaton did once smile in a film. At the conclusion of 'Le Roi des Champs Elysees' in which he played his penultimate starring role, Keaton embraced the heroine and, before bestowing the final kiss, turned his head and beamed radiantly at the audience.' (The Guinness book of Film Facts and Feats. Patrick Robertson. P.279.) After all Buster's denials, I would hardly have believed one without the other. So how do we explain Buster's forgetfulness of this occasion? Firstly there's the drink, but more importantly, Buster never thought anywhere but France would ever see the film. In other words, the film was local, not American, and so it didn't count.]

²³³[???

Buster always gave anybody a loan that wanted one, and he told me about two or three of them, friends that were down on their luck, and of course he never got a dime back, ever! Harold Goodwin and his wife were broke at one point, He was the villain in College, he gave him money. He gave Hoot Gibson money more than once, and two three of his other old buddies from that era that I wouldn't know about, because they were all at one time or another out of work and broke.

One man who did pay up was Norman Kerry, whom Hollywood had written off as an irresponsible actor who drank too much. Kerry came to see me one day, and asked, "Do you remember the time about four years ago when I borrowed a thousand dollars from you?"

"I do, now that you mention it, Norman." I told him.

"Well, I just did a little acting job," he explained, "and got \$1,000 for it. But I cannot give it all to you. I need some of it to live on. Would it be all right if I only gave you \$900 and keep the rest for myself?"

My old friend, Norman Kerry, died recently, but I'll never forget him or the day he gave me a nine-to-one split on the first thousand dollars he had seen in many months.

I also am one man who can throw a sincere kiss to the Internal Revenue Bureau for consideration in time of need. At the height of my troubles the Bureau informed me I owed \$18,000. But after I showed them my books and convinced them that my current income was only a shadow of what it had been they offered to clean the slate for \$4,000.

Throughout all my troubles I was buoyed up by one thing: the conviction that no matter what else happened I could always get work in show business in some capacity. Another advantage I had over other once-rich brokes was being able to live without luxuries.

I enjoy having expensive things, but it did not bother me when I had to turn my Cadillac in for a Ford and wear ready-made suits instead of custom-tailored jobs and live without servants in a cheap bungalow court. After I made the picture in Paris I made another in London. But these two pictures, as I said, were too cheaply made to re-establish my reputation.

None of them was any good, because in none of those countries did the producer have money enough to finance a proper production. And the day had passed when the public would come to see a movie with inferior props, camera work, and generally poor production.

THE INVADER. FILMED IN ENGLAND.

The surviving directors copy of the shooting script indicates it was based on a story provided by Keaton.

Adrian Brunel: 'And of course, we had Buster Keaton. Buster was ill most of the time, but he was a grand trouser: it was bad luck that he should have got into this galere....My difficulties involved people struggling or not, with their own peculiarities, such as financial recklessness, writing phoney checks, lack of sexual control, and disturbing addictions... When the picture was finished, it was discovered it only ran sixty minutes. The distributors refused the film as too short so a woman was engaged to put back every cut out piece of film to make it six thousand feet long. This meant, for instance, that when in our version a character dashed from a room, banging the door after him, and he was then seen in the hall haring away from the banged door, you would see in this childish new version the first part of the man going from the room and added to the shot would be five or six seconds of shut door, followed by the character just completing the action of shutting the door the other side and dashing off! This sort of thing went on throughout the film....'

That was Sam Spiegel, one of his first efforts. Once again, going into it, Buster knew it wasn't going to be any good, he just did it for the money.

In between these professional mishaps I kept on drinking like a fish. Once I was taken to a sanitarium in a strait jacket, and twice was given the Keeley cure, or a reasonable facsimile. I will describe this cure briefly here, though with no great pleasure. It starts with three days during which the nurses and doctors do nothing but pour liquor into you, giving you a drink each half-hour on the half-hour.

I trust that any drunkards who happen to read this will not be misguided enough to rush off to the nearest sanitarium to get all of these free drinks. You get your favorite snort, all right, but never twice in a row. Instead they start you off on whiskey and on succeeding rounds give you gin, rum, beer, brandy, wine- before they get around to the whiskey again.

Needless to say, the Bacchus in you is revolted and rebellious long before your three-day round-the-clock drinking marathon is over. When you plead, "Oh, no! Take it away please!" all you get from your bartenders and barmaids in the white coats is a friendly smile.

"Please take it away," you repeat, "it hurts my stomach."

"Just one more." they say, for their purpose is to make the hurt in your stomach grow until it becomes unforgettable. And, being a weakling, you take that one more just as you did in a thousand barrooms.

Bill Cox. Writer and Friend: "There's so many kinds of alcoholics, My God, I was married to one. I'm an alcoholic myself, I'm a drunk, I love to get drunk, I mean, there's all kinds of alcoholics, and Bus was the kind that couldn't drink. After he had two drinks he didn't know what the hell he was doing. He'd keep on drinking, and then they'd put him in one of those places, y'know, Keeley cure. That's where they just keep pouring it into you, thinking you'll get sick of it. And it could kill you. It killed several people that I knew about."

The Keeley cure may have worked wonders for some alcoholics, but it did nothing for me that first time. When I got out I could think of too many excuses for drinking- the grandson of my grocer was having a birthday, or I had to celebrate good old St. Swithin's Day, the inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes, or some other important occasion.

After taking that cure the second time, I was taken home and immediately went for a walk on the golf course. I walked over the entire eighteen holes, and, on reaching the clubhouse, I walked to the bar and ordered two manhattans. I drank them one after another. They not only tasted great, they stayed down.

That was in 1935 and, after proving to myself I could drink if I felt like it, stop if I felt like it, I did not touch another drop of whiskey or any other alcoholic drink for five years.

I know the family put Buster in what they call De-tox now, they put him in a couple of times.

Divorces Mae Scribbens. She sued him for divorce naming an old friend of theirs, Mrs. Leah Sewell, as corespondent. Buster and Leah had 'committed adultery at Santa Barbara on the 4th of July 1935 through the 7th as well as at her home on the 14th of July.' Her lawyer asked "that the plaintiff be awarded a reasonable sum commensurate with the ability of the defendant to pay...." Buster did nothing. Mae was awarded \$2,000 payable in four installments. Decree final on October 14, 1936.

When read the above, Eleanor laughed gleefully [cackled] when Leah Sewell's name was mentioned.

Leah Sewell was a very close friend of Louise, not Buster.

Is that decidedly unlikely is it?

Not totally unlikely, but unlikely. It could have happened, who knows? When they separated, when she found out she wasn't going to get any money out of him or anything... Natalie had taken everything - when Natalie got through with him he had ten thousand dollars, and he'd had that gorgeous home, millions of dollars, a big yacht, everything, she got everything - so whatever this Mae Scribbens thought was going to happen didn't happen, so I guess after nine months she took a powder.

He wasn't aware of her leaving until he found that she took a half of everything in the house. There was two sets of silver flatware, she took half of each, she didn't take a set. She took half of two different sets of dishes..she just deliberately took half of everything.

And then she stole his dog, she stole Elmer the St. Bernard. He didn't care about anything else, but he hired a private detective to try to find her to find his dog. He never did. Her original home was up in the Fresno area, she had family up there and he thought that might have been where she went, so that was the first place that he sent people to look. But he never saw the dog again. Never found her either, didn't care to find her.

But one thing she did do that he told me about, the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, on Hollywood Boulevard, was big and glamorous at that time, it's still a nice hotel, and she went up there and opened a beauty shop, I don't know if she knew anything about beauty shops or not, but she opened a beauty shop, and the sign that she put out front said Mrs. in little tiny letters, Buster Keaton in great big letters, so it looked like Buster Keaton's Beauty Shop, but to make it legal she had to put Mrs. on it, about four inches high where everything else was a foot and a half high. He didn't care about the beauty shop, but he had to force her to take his name off.

1934-7. EDUCATIONAL TWO-REELERS. CHEATERS.

Income for 1934 \$44,500.

After that I had to take anything I could get. And what I got was a contract to make comedy short subjects for Educational Films. When this expired I was signed for a similar deal by Columbia Pictures. It meant a living, for I was paid \$2,500 each for them and made about six a year.

These two-reelers, shot in three days each, were what picture people call 'cheaters', meaning movies thrown together as quickly and cheaply as possible. All of the energy and ingenuity of the director is concentrated on the saving of money. New props and scenery were never used if old ones would do. The supporting cast couldn't support themselves, and the scripts were cooked up as quickly and carelessly as a hobo's mulligan stew. For they brought in no revenue to the company, were just thrown in free with Columbia's features.

Several times I urged Harry Cohn, president of Columbia, to let me spend a little more time and money. I explained that on a larger budget I could turn out two-reelers that he could sell instead of giving them away as part of a package.

Cohn, whose company was doing great without my suggestions, was not interested. And making those 'cheaters' was the way I supported myself and my family from 1935 to 1940. Occasionally I got a day's work at some other major studio in a feature.

[So far the only B.K. commentator I can find who has actually watched these 'cheaters' is Leonard Maltin [bless him] In 'The Great Movie Shorts', P. 154-161. I have reordered this article chronologically. Unless otherwise noted all information below on these shorts is his.]

Leonard Maltin: 'Legend has it that Buster Keaton's career started sliding downhill in 1930 and never stopped- that his talkie films are unspeakable horrors. Keaton himself perpetuated this myth, and there are many who believe it.

The talking films, however, still exist, and they disprove what has been said for so many years. To be sure, they are not in the same league as Keaton's silents, but they show a comic talent very much alive, and, in some cases, they compare favorably to other comedies being made at the same time.

In 1934, E.W. Hammons of Educational Pictures gave Keaton a chance for a comeback by starring him in a series of two-reel comedies.

The sixteen shorts that he made over the next few years ranged from excellent to awful, but even in the worst, Buster tried his best.

He was too dedicated a comedian to give anything less than his all, so he swallowed his pride and tried to make the most of some hopeless situations.

Most of the Educationals were simple comedies built around a boy-meets-girl theme, with another man usually completing the triangle and causing Buster to fight for his woman. As such, they were pleasant, and not pushy, but they lacked the inventive sight gags that had marked Keaton's earlier work.

All are two reels (approximately twenty minutes in length.) These are only Keaton's starring shorts; the list does not include guest appearances such as those made in 'Screen Snapshots' and 'La Fiesta de Santa Barbara', nor does it include Keaton's three directorial efforts for Carey Wilson's short-subject series at MGM.'

1. The Gold Ghost. Educational. (3/16/34)²³⁴ Charles Lamont. Dorothy Dix, William Worthington, Lloyd Ingram, Warren Hymie, Leo Willis, Joe Young.

Jilted by his fiancée in Boston, Buster dejectedly drives out to Vulture City, Nevada, a ghost town, where he appoints himself sheriff.

The Gold Ghost comes closest to being a 'silent' comedy, with practically no dialog. Buster, dejected when his girl friend jilts him, goes away to forget her and winds up in a western ghost town. He makes himself at home there, and fantasizes himself as sheriff. Trouble begins when gold is discovered nearby and a horde of people-including a robber (Leo Willis) and Buster's girl (Dorothy Dix)-invade the one-horse town. The film gives Buster an excellent vehicle for pantomime and some good sight gags; for once, the cheapness of the Educational product works in the films favor.

2. Allez Oop. Educational (5/25/34), Charles Lamont. Dorothy Sebastian, George Lewis, Harry Myers, The Flying Escalantes.

When Buster's girl friend falls for a trapeze artist, Buster tries to beat him at his own game.

For his second short, Allez Oop, Educational hired Dorothy Sebastian, who had been Buster's leading lady in his last silent film, Spite Marriage, in 1929. Miss Sebastian's stock in the movie world had also slipped, although she was still beautiful and a delightful vis-a-vis as the girl Buster tries to impress by taking up aerobatics.

²³⁴[For some reason Americans place the month before the day, so, in English, this would be 16/3/34; the same applies to all of Mr. Maltin's dates.]

1935

Income for 1935 \$42,500. Buster acquired an agent, Leo Morrison, who represented him for the next fifteen years. [Dardis.]

BUSTER KEATON'S BREAKDOWN.

Buster Keaton, the famous film comedian, who is lying seriously ill at Los Angeles, has been transferred to the psychopathic ward of a hospital. In addition to his pneumonia the actor is now reported to be suffering from a nervous breakdown. (Reuter)

BUSTER KEATON.

Doctors put him in Straight-jacket.

From our own correspondent. NEW YORK, Tuesday. [October??] 1935.

The condition of Mr. Buster Keaton, the film comedian, who is suffering from a nervous breakdown following influenza, has become so serious that his doctors have put him in a straight-jacket.

They describe him as a 'nervous wreck' and say that his isolation will be imperative for some time.

It has been said that his illness is ascribed to financial and domestic troubles. His first wife was Natalie Talmadge, and after their divorce he married Mae Scribbens, who recently obtained a divorce at a time when Natalie Keaton was pressing for payment of arrears of alimony.

Mr Keaton's financial position was revealed when in a voluntary...[Press clipping.]

3. Palooka from Paducah. Educational (1/11/35), Charles Lamont. Joe, Myra, and Louise Keaton, Dewey Robinson, Bull Montana.

The repeal of prohibition cuts off the family's source of income, so Pa decides to go into the prizefight game.

More felicitous [than Mack Sennett's direction] was the casting of Buster's performing family in two of his shorts. His Father, mother, and sister appeared in Palooka from Paducah, and Louise and younger brother Harry appeared in Love Nest on Wheels, along with Buster's old friend and colleague Al St. John. The entire Keaton family was a joy to behold, and Myra and Louise fitted in so well to comic hillbilly characterizations that Mack Sennett used both of them in another short he made for Educational at the time, Way Up Thar, starring Joan Davis.

4. One Run Elmer. Educational (2/22/35), Charles Lamont. Lona Andre, Dewey Robinson, Harold Goodwin.

One-Run Elmer was likewise conceived to be shot as economically as possible, but the conception is logical and the short turns out to be quite pleasant. Buster runs a gas station in the middle of the desert, and, before long, he faces competition from a young go-getter (Harold Goodwin) who builds a similar station across the road. The plot thickens when a pretty young girl (Lona Andre) drives through and announces that she's come to live in the nearby town. Buster and Harold set out to impress her at the next local baseball game, which provides the basis for a string of good gags and enables Buster to win the girl in the end.

5. Hayseed Romance. Educational (3/15/35), Charles Lamont. Jane Jones, Dorothea Kent.

Buster answers an 'object matrimony' ad, finds the lady in question to be an old bag, but falls in love with her niece.

6. Tars and Stripes. Educational (5/3/35), Charles Lamont. Dorothea Kent, Jack Shutta.

Rookie Buster's relationship with a tough petty officer isn't improved when he falls for his girl.

7. The E-Flat Man. Educational (10/25/35) Charles Lamont. Dorothea Kent, Broderick O'Farrel, Charles McAvoy, Si Jenks, Fern Emmett, Jack Shutta.

Runaway bandits foil Buster's plan to elope.

8. The Timid Young Man. Educational (10/25/35), Mack Sennett. Lona Andre, Tiny Sandford, Kitty McHugh, Harry Bowen. Buster is set to marry one girl, proposes to another the night before, and in running away, meets and falls in love with another. Buster was directed in one short by none other than Mack Sennett, temporarily out of retirement and working at Educational; the result, The Timid Young Man, was hardly evocative of either Keaton or Sennett at his best, but it was an adequate entry in the two-reeler series.

1936

John Gilbert dies.

Fall 1936. Buster was in arrears \$4,500. On Norma's advice, Natalie took Buster to court in New York, where he was shooting four Educationals. Buster told reporters:

"You tell the judge that if Natalie will let me alone for awhile, I'll be on my feet again..... She knows I'm broke. She knows I'm trying to get back in the money again and when I do she knows I'll square everything with her. ..I got this job with Educational Pictures because I went on the wagon. I haven't had a drink since last Christmas day. If Natalie will let me alone so I can work, I'll never take another drink." [Dardis.]

'The persecution tactics indulged in by the plaintiff have been motivated by her sister, Norma Talmadge, who for years has evidenced a violent dislike for me. The plaintiff has always been dominated by the advice and guidance of her sister.' [Dardis.]

When Natalie took him to court to get more out of him... The first time she took him to court to get more alimony the judge cut it in half, and then a couple of years later she decided to go for it again, she took him back to get more alimony, and the judge cut it down, I think he wound up having to pay her a hundred, or a hundred and fifty a month child support and everything else. So every time she went to court she came out on the worst end of the stick.

It seems almost *inconceivable* that she would be stupid enough to keep hitting him for more alimony.

I know. And she had to've known he had nothing, she got everything in the first place. She had taken everything he owned to begin with, he had ten thousand dollars left when she got through with him, he'd been worth *well* over a million before this. He wouldn't fight her, legally she was not entitled to more than half, community property laws in California, she could have had half of everything, but he didn't fight her, he let her have almost everything, and then she still comes back for more twice. When he told me about it, years later, he giggled. Every time she took him to court, he won.

So he was paying this child support most of the rest of his life?
No. As soon as the kids got to be eighteen it went down..

But it's incredible, she was so rich. They all were.

Well, you see, she was just bitter and wanted to get even, I guess, I don't know. The kids came and visited occasionally, but with armed guard, so Buster couldn't kidnap them or do anything.

Say what???

Right. He took the kids one time on a trip, I don't know where it was, but anyway he took the kids on some kind of a trip, and she had him arrested for kidnapping, and after that the only time he was allowed to see them was with this armed guard with the pistol on his hip, like a policeman's uniform, private guard. But once Jimmy got his drivers license, then they were free to take off and do as they pleased, and they used to come to the house fairly regularly. Oh, well they were in and out of the house all the time after Jim got his drivers license, of course, his mother was never allowed to find out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO.

I said, "I never broke my neck."

1937>39. New bridge pupil. Hollywood Cavalcade.

9. Grand Slam Opera. Educational (2/21/36), Charles Lamont. Diana Lewis, Harold Goodwin, John Ince, Melrose Coakley, Bud Jamison, Eddie Fetherstone.

Only once did Buster actually write one of his shorts, and the result, appropriately, was the best film he made for Educational, Grand Slam Opera. A hilarious spoof of the Major Bowes amateur-hour radio show, it opens with Buster leaving his home town via train to crash the Big-time in New York. As he leaves, the townspeople sing a farewell song ('So Long Elmer/ Gee we're glad to see you go...' Rudi Blesh reports: '...that Buster paid three hundred dollars out of his own pocket to buy the rights to George M. Cohan's 'So Long, Mary' to parody in this short; he took the initiative rather than have the short go over-budget).

Buster manages to get on Colonel Crow's Amateur Hour (the Colonel does nothing but sit at a microphone and repeat genially, "All right, all right"), where he proceeds to do magic and juggling tricks the radio audience can't possibly appreciate. He makes a shambles of the broadcast, and spends that evening in his apartment trying to brush up on various tricks (balancing a bowling ball on a billiard cue, for instance), much to the chagrin of the girl who lives below him (Diana Lewis). Once he meets the girl he's hooked and tries to woo her, but without success. Defeated, he returns home, but chances to hear a radio show announcing that Colonel Crow is looking for him- he's won the weekly prize, apparently in the comedy category. Buster rushes back to New York to get his prize, and wins the girl at the same time.

Grand Slam Opera contains one belly laugh after another, and Keaton's guiding hand is felt in the number of visual gags the short carries out. His trip home, after he thinks he's lost everything, is shown via a montage of train wheels, car wheels, and bicycle wheels. It concludes with Buster walking along a lonely road hitching a ride. The short shows what Keaton was capable of doing at this time- if someone had only given him a chance.

10. Three on a Limb. Educational (3/3/36), Charles Lamont. Lona Andre, Harold Goodwin, Grant Withers, Barbara Bedford, John Ince, Fern Emmett, Phylis Crane.

Boy-Scout leader Buster unwittingly walks into a triangle situation when he falls in love with carhop Molly.

11. Blue Blazes. Educational (8/21/36), Raymond Kane. Arthur Jarrett, Rose Kessner, Patty Wilson, Marilyn Stuart.

Buster is an inept fireman who in the end becomes a hero, saving three women from a blazing building.

12. The Chemist. Educational (10/9/36), Al Christie. Marilyn Stuart, Earl Gilbert, Donald MacBride, Herman Lieb.

Buster, a chemist's assistant, gets mixed up with gangsters.

13. Mixed Magic. Educational (11/20/36), Raymond Kane. Eddie Lambert, Marilyn Stuart, Eddie Hall, Jimmy Fox, Walter Fenner, Pass Le Noir. Buster falls in love with a magician's beautiful assistant.

1937

14. Jail Bait. Educational (1/8/37), Charles Lamont. Harold Goodwin, Bud Jamison, Mathew Betz, Betty Andre.

Buster agrees to pose as a murderer to throw off the police while his reporter pal searches for the real killer. Remade as Heather and Yon by Andy Clyde.

15. Ditto. Educational (2/12/37), Charles Lamont. Gloria Brewster, Barbara Brewster, Harold Goodwin, Lynton Brent, Al Thompson, Bob Ellsworth.

Iceman Buster has a crush on one of his customers, not knowing she has a twin who lives next door. Some of the Educational's were embarrassingly bad, notably Ditto, a film that starts off promisingly with Buster as an iceman, but quickly deteriorates. The final gag is not to be believed. Throughout the film, Buster has been plagued by twin girls, one of whom likes him and one of whom does not.[See The Playhouse.] He becomes so nervous that he runs away and spends the next few years living as a hermit in the woods. One day he chances to meet a pretty young girl who invites him to visit her campsite around the bend. He goes back to his quarters, spruces up, and runs to join the girl, only to find out that she is one of seven identical sisters. And how is this shown? From the rear! On this lamentably unfunny shot the film ends.

16. Love Nest on Wheels. Educational (3/26/37), Charles Lamont. Myra Keaton, Al St. John, Lynton Brent, Diana Lewis, Bud Jamison, Louise Keaton, Harry Keaton.
A hillbilly family is in danger of losing their rural hotel.

Educational Pictures went out of business. Goes back to MGM as gag writer, June 24th. Directed three one-reel shorts. Long intervals between work. [Dardis.]²³⁵

1938

WE HAD A WONDERFUL TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS.

Hospitalised for alcoholism.

Jack Shulman (retired lieutenant colonel): "I told you, Ma, that I won't come until Buster asks for me himself."

Myra: "He did, while he could still talk."

Jack: "Why can't he talk?"

Myra: "He's choking to death on his own blood."

[arrives..]

Jack: "Hold his head up, Ma. He's going in the back seat of my car. Come on, I'm taking him to Sawtelle." (U.S. Veterans General Hospital.)

[arrives]

"Cut the red tape Sergeant, this is Corporal Joseph Frank Keaton.

Forget the Buster business. To you he's a vet. Put him in a closed ward under a detention sheet."

"Is he nuts?"

"As sane as you are, goddamn it, but when he drinks he can be violent. He's strong. Handle him, but don't manhandle him. I'm warning you on both counts."

(Two days later) "Don't worry, Bus, Uncle Sam is paying for this."

I'm down at the Soldiers' Home in Sawtelle. They won't release you out of that until they've X-rayed everything you've got. If you've got dandruff, they'll keep you there.

The doctor calls me in and says,

"When did you break your neck?" I said,

"I never broke my neck." He says,

"Look at this X-ray. The callus has grown over the crack, next to the top vertebra."

I asked him how long he thought it happened.

"It could be anywhere between ten and fifteen years ago."

I start thinking back- I had to think for quite a while before figuring out that it must have been that damn fall on the track during Sherlock, Jr. Well, I never knew it.

²³⁵[It has been pointed out that, due to time pressures, the 'cheaters' contain many gags from previous films, including the Arbuckle shorts. As Buster would not have used anyone's material but his own, a Keaton scholar could easily find much in these shorts to show exactly which bits of business Buster wrote for Roscoe.]

Never stopped working. That's luck. No nerve pinched or anything. That's a fluke. That could have ruined you... there are so many things in the vertebrae that could cause you trouble!

[Takes on Eleanor Norris as bridge pupil.]
Tell me about who you are...

I was born Eleanor Norris on Hollywood Boulevard, in Hollywood, California in the Garden Court Apartments.²³⁶ My mother was a housewife and my father was an electrician with Warner Brothers studio. I started taking dance lessons when I was six because my cousin was a ballerina with the Chicago Civic Opera Company, and she used to teach on the off season.

When I was ten my father was killed at the studio. My mother was a very good seamstress and she then went to work at one of the big department stores in the alteration department. She got a pension she could have lived on, but it wasn't enough to raise two daughters. This was during the depression. My sister was five years younger than I was. When I was eleven or twelve years old I'd go do little dance numbers at womens clubs and that kind of thing, special occasion things, big birthday parties, anybody that wanted, and you'd get a meal and two dollars, and that was a lot of money. When you're ten, eleven years old that's a lot of money, especially during the depression. I used to be able to buy a weeks worth of food for the three of us for five dollars during the worst of that depression. Anyway, that's what started it.

So then when I was fourteen I went to work dancing, because I had been taking lessons from the time I was six. That was it, I never went back to school. I think that was in 1934. I loved dancing, always had since the time I was tiny. It was a pleasure to do what I wanted to do and get paid for it at the same time. The first picture I ever worked in was the last film Lillian Tashman ever made before she died. I have no idea of the plot except that she was supposed to be a ballerina, and we did a couple of big ballet numbers in the movie. As I remember I was paid around seventy-five dollars a week, which was good in those days. I know the first time I went to work in New York in a night club it was also seventy-five dollars a week, and later on it was a hundred and twenty-five a week, something like that. Once you were shooting it would be more than that because you'd go into overtime. It's way much higher now. The Unions keep forcing it up. I enjoyed dancing and enjoyed the kids I worked with and everything. But nothing spectacular. It was just a way of making a living.

The first major film I was in was The Gay Divorcee, and that was RKO, that was Rogers/Astaire. I was never attached to any particular studio until the end of the whole thing. All through the forties, all through the war years, and up until television came in, I was under contract at MGM. But before that I worked everywhere, Universal, RKO, Paramount, MGM. Being under contract at MGM was fun, it's like a family, they had I think it was 32 dancers because they had different productions going on, and sixteen boy dancers and sixteen or eighteen singers, and we all worked together in different films. I worked mostly for Jack Donohue. There were about four different choreographers there, Bob Alton, Jack Donohue, Busby Berkeley and a couple more, but basically I worked for Donohue and sometimes Alton. You worked pretty much all the time, you almost didn't get any days off, because all the productions were waiting in line.

²³⁶[In 1919? She was 19 in 1938 when they met. Blesh.]

Rehearsals was an eight hour day, but when we got shooting we did as many as required to finish up something. One of the most fun things I did was Red Skelton's first film, *Bathing Beauty*, it was Esther Williams first film. I don't remember the plot except he was in an all girls school, and they were forced to take him because he'd made application and they didn't want him, so they made him take all these horrible courses to drive him out, and one was ballet class. We all were in ribbons and bows and pink tutus, ballet slippers and all of that, and he had to dress like we did. It was fun. Of course, we knew Red socially as well, and it was a fun time doing that thing. He was a doll. I always used to say he was my favorite big-shot star because no matter where we were or what we were doing, if he was in the vicinity across a crowded lobby, or a restaurant he'd say "Eleanor. How are you? How's your silly husband?" kind of thing. And he was the only one that ever recognised me and knew me and called me by name, 'cause mostly I was just wallpaper background for Buster, but he always plucked me out of the crowd which always tickled me. He's still living down in Palm Springs [1993] He was in radio for a long time before he ever did film and then after that when television became big he had his own show on TV for a long time. He was around from the early thirties. He started out as a kid working stand-up comedy at dance marathons during the depression, when they had these ten minute rest periods and he'd get up and do his thing. He was very big in television all through the fifties until he just decided to retire I guess.

Then they quit making musicals because television was killing them and they couldn't spend that money anymore. We called it the purge, everybody practically was fired out there. Not just contract players but a lot of duplicate actors they let their contracts run out, MGM always had duplicates for everybody. If Clark Gable decided to get testy and didn't want to do a film, they had a back-up for him that would do it. And they held that over their heads at all times. They'd go off salary without pay, and the duplicate person would make the movie. All their major stars had back-ups. So I think most of the back-ups went off salary at that time too. Because they quit making a lot of films too. Films started going from fifty or sixty films a year down to nothing, you know, however many. Buster was on the writing staff at MGM at the time, and we'd go back and forth to work together, that kind of thing.

You've managed to get through your first twenty years of life in no time flat..

There wasn't anything interesting or exciting about it. My whole life hasn't been, except as a reflection of Buster's career. I've worked with him, as a living prop, *huh*, so to speak.

But you must have, at the time, seen it as very important, as a career and as your future. I mean, were you saving for anything? What were you doing with the rest of your time? Just practising?

Yeah, taking classes and.. I lived at home with my mother and my sister.. didn't do anything in particular. I was always a miser, I always saved all my money. Bought a car when I had to. Here you had to, you couldn't go anywhere, or get to work or do anything without a car. I knew a couple of gals I worked with that didn't have cars, and I used to pick them up and take them to work and back, 'cause it'd be impossible otherwise. It'd take you forever if you started doing buses. You have to transfer three or four times, you'd have to start in the middle of the night to get to work by eight in the morning. But I was never a big spender, I saved my money. I didn't really have any hobbies or outside interests. I always read, everything. I had a cousin and an aunt that used to always give me

books, and I probably read every one of them twelve or fourteen times. When I had nothing else to do I'd sit down and pick up a book, a new one, or read the old ones again. But I guess in looking back at it, I hadn't given it much thought, but I guess I was pretty much of a loner. I never went around looking for friends, going out and playing around a lot with big groups of people, that kind of thing. Perfectly happy sitting at home with a book. I just used to read everything, novels, mysteries, my favorite things were biographies, but I couldn't really tell you who at this point. I don't remember. But as I say, I'd read everything. I suppose if I was desperate enough I'd have read the phone book.

How would you actually have seen yourself, say shortly before you met Buster?

I was a good dancer, and I was the right size and shape to get hired. Being raised almost without a Father, I mean he was killed when I was ten, and my mother working, she later on got re-married, and me working, it was.. *making* money was a necessity, it wasn't just a fun thing, you'd work and go out and spend it all on clothes, things like that. It was a necessary thing and that's the way I was raised and that's the way I've always thought about it. You save your money and make sure all the bills are paid first before you do anything else.

Was it in any way a problem being a good-looking young lady in the studios at the time?

No! Everybody was. All the kids were. If they weren't good-looking they didn't get hired. I don't think I ever gave much thought to myself one way or another. I knew I was good-looking enough to get jobs and things, but at that time, early on when I was working, I wasn't the ideal type. I never did look like one of those round faced little baby-doll types, and that's what was very prominent when you're going back to that Busby Berkeley era.

Mmm..Yes and no. I've seen photos of you from the period, and then I look at Busby Berkeley's chorus line and I can't understand why they were considered good-looking. There's some nice faces, but after that they look sort of lumpy where you were slim and elegant.

Well, some of those kids were seven, eight years older than I am and in those days they did hire little... When I first started to work, I was five three, and I was one of the tallest ones, and sometimes I wouldn't get a job because I was too tall. They were all what they call ponies. They tried to get them all within an inch or two of five foot, and I was always one of the tallest ones in the group. And then later on at MGM when I was working I was one of the little ones. There was about four little girls, and I was one of the four, the baby ones. The dancers they liked were the long lean long-legged ones, five eight, five nine. And they were right, they looked much much better than little ones. But when you hire those little tiny ones, they're not necessarily chubby, but they look it, they photograph chubbier than they really are.

And so it was no problem, I mean you read biographies of people like Zanuck and some of the other moguls, and you get the impression that almost any woman's life in the studio must have been hell...

Oh, they wouldn't bother with chorus kids, that would be beneath their dignity. They'd go for featured players and stars. They don't pick on, low-lifes so to speak. They would never notice you were alive. So there was never any problem like that.

So it was really quite a sheltered existence?

Yuh. Occasionally I dated one or two of the boys I worked with, but nothing ever serious. When I was working night clubs, I did that for a couple of years, '36, '37, '38, in there, I would occasionally date the musicians in the band, but then again nothing serious. Mostly it would be a group of five or six 'Let's go eat'. Or I worked in Miami Beach two whole winters and we used to go to the beach and

spend the day on the beach with a group of five or six...two of the boys in the band had cars, they were based in Chicago and they drove down, so they had their cars. So they were the chauffeurs, and they would pick us up and we'd all go to the beach and whatever.

So up until 1938 when you met Buster, in terms of relationships you'd been entirely uninvolved?

Yeah.

Uninterested?

Yeah.

Why do you think that was?

I have no idea. I had no interest in getting married or anything like that. And of course in working too you work all over the place. Like in Miami you'd be there for three months and you're gone, New York, six months and you're gone, and the people you were associating with you never see again. That kind of thing... One of the boys I worked with at MGM was the one that introduced me to Buster's house, so I could learn to play bridge. The kids used to sit behind the scenery and play cards all the time in between shots and set-ups, and I used to watch them play bridge, and it looked fascinating. And I said,

"I want to learn to play that. What is that?" because I used to play cards.

I'd played cards all my life, goldfish, gin rummy, all kinds of games, pinochle. whatever there was to play. Pinochle? [pronounced pea-knuckle] it's a strange game, it would take a long time to tell you, and then it would take you a long time to learn it, because it did me, it isn't even a normal deck of cards, special deck. But anyway, I wanted to learn to play bridge. So this one boy that was playing that I worked with, he said,

"Well I know where there's a card game and a good teacher all day every day.

When we're through I'll take you up there." Now Harry Keaton, Buster's brother, was his best friend. I can't think of the kids name. I know he's been dead a long long time, he wasn't very healthy. But anyway, he took me up there, and I was in and out of the house playing bridge probably a couple of times a week for a whole year before Buster ever asked me out. Of course he was involved with somebody else at the time, too. I'd seen him at MGM a lot, wandering around in the commissary and outside, but I never met him. I probably knew he was on the writing staff, but I'm not sure of that. I used to just see him having lunch or walking down the street or something like that, I didn't think about it, what he was doing there. I figured he belonged there.

And you don't have any particular memory of the first time of going to the house?

No, except the purpose in going there was to learn to play bridge. And I met the whole family en masse, I imagine Harry was probably there, and I met Louise and Myra at the same time because they were playing bridge. They played bridge all day every day. When Buster wasn't working they played bridge, the whole family. If it was just Buster and his mother, they would play two-handed pinochle, when it was just the three of us they'd force me into three-handed pinochle, which I never liked because I always lost. They'd been playing for eight hundred years, and I was just trying to learn, so I hated it. But four people in the house you played bridge, five people or more you played hearts, that's another good game. When Buster and I were alone we played gin rummy, played cribbage, we'd play two-handed pinochle, and yahtzee, which is a dice game. So we had all kinds of games we played just the two of us. But bridge was the major game if we could collect four people in a room. He never enjoyed poker.

Card playing was a passion for him, they played all the time. He didn't play all day every day, 'cause he was working in between, and the card games most of the time would just be in the evening, except at week-ends it may go all day.

Didn't you think it strange that he'd play cards all day?

No, I didn't find it strange.

How come you kept going there so long? Is there really that much to learn?

Oh yes. I was in and out of that place for a couple of times a week for a year before I felt competent enough to sit down and pick up cards without somebody supervising, and especially when you're playing in his league. He could play with high powered bridge teachers. He played with Culbertson and Simms all the big bridge writers he played with before Charlie Goren came along. Charlie Goren wound up being one of the big writers later on. And Shinewald who's still a big bridge writer now, he came out to our house and played a couple of times, and we went to his house and played, he and Pat his wife were naturally bridge players, and they were friends of a friend of ours so we got acquainted that way. Years ago, before I ever knew him, Buster used to play bridge for twenty-five cents a point. Now he couldn't afford that, but Joe Schenck and two or three of the other guys would back him. He played for a nickel and they'd make up the other twenty cents. Of course, more often than not, he'd win, so they weren't risking much. But just in case he had a bad night he couldn't afford it. He used to play in very high-powered games. Without even being a big winner or a big loser, you could win or lose thirty five hundred, four thousand dollars in an evening, at that price. And he used to do that on a regular basis. That's why I was not competent to play bridge for a whole year, you don't step into that kind of a bridge game without knowing what you're doing.

Buster was on the writing staff at MGM and he was making all those Educational shorts. He was always on salary at MGM except when he went out to do something else. He'd be off salary for say two weeks while he did something else at some other studio and then he'd be back on salary again. Buster'd say "I'm going to Columbia to do so and so.." they said "Fine."

When he'd come back he'd say

"I'm back." So he'd be off salary at MGM for two weeks while he did those pictures with Feschier and Pagano at Universal, and he did two or three of those, and he was gone for quite a few weeks at the time.

He hadn't been drinking for a long time before I met him.

When do you think Buster first began to take an interest in you as a future partner?

It's very difficult to tell, because my main interest in Buster for the whole first year I ever knew him was learning to play bridge, and my focus was on that bridge table and the cards. It really didn't matter who was sitting elsewhere at the table. He said the first time he ever paid any attention to me at all was I used to have somebody stand behind me to help me when I started, and one day somebody, I don't know who, was sitting on a chair or standing behind me watching, and I did something and he yelled

"That's stupid!" Y'know, one of those kind of things. And I reared back and I said,

"I don't know this game very well, but I'm damned if I'm stupid." And I yelled back at him. And Buster suddenly says,

"Who was that?" He said that was the first time he ever noticed me. I've been sitting in the chair for six months or so. He didn't even notice me. He was focused on the cards too.

I really didn't pay that much attention to him as a person. Except that he was.... when we were playing we'd break for dinner, and he was a *good* cook. Everybody would get in the kitchen and do something towards putting dinner together so we could get back to the bridge table quicker, and he was a good cook... He had a lady friend that he'd been dating off and on for years, Dorothy Sebastian. She had been through a marriage and it had ended and he did too, so he noticed me before I ever noticed him, but he knew there was no way that he was going to be able to dump Dorothy unless he got her sidetracked. We used to go to the wrestling matches all the time. She was a very good actress, and she was very good in *Spite Marriage*, and a very nice lady too. She had been, way back when they were working together, and after that when they'd see each other occasionally between marriages and whatever else, she was drinking heavy too, by the time he dried out and was dating her again I think she was on the wagon as well, so there was never any drinking problems. And she was a good bridge player. She used to be there at the house playing bridge all the time. But he had to find her a boyfriend before he could ask me for a date. Of course all of this went right by... I had no idea about any of this. I used to come and go all by myself in my own car.

Slambastian. Buster used to call her Slambastian. I have no idea why. He picked up silly nicknames. He used to call me Elsinore, and that's a lake down here towards San Diego, Lake Elsinore, so he decided that that was my name so he called me Elsinore sometimes, when the mood struck him he'd call me that.

I liked her. She was real nice. She still had money from her career, from her divorce and whatever, she drove a real nice car, had real nice clothes and everything, but once Buster introduced her to her new feller, that took care of that. He was young and beautiful.. They used to have villains and heroes in the wrestling game, and he was one of the young beautiful heroes. See, Buster had him out to the house two or three times, for dinner and whatever. He made friends with him. They used to work the southern California circuit, they'd wrestle in San Diego and San Bernadino.. so they were always in the area but they wouldn't wrestle in the same place week by week. But he had him out to the house two or three times and of course made sure Dorothy was there, and it didn't take very long. Of course being as stupid as I am, none of this ever dawned on me. He was devious and subtle, that's the only time I ever knew him to do anything like that. But he just knew... I mean, she was at an age where she wasn't going to go out and find a boyfriend that easily. I think she was older than Buster, she looked it.²³⁷ But see by now Buster was 42, and I think she might have been a little older, and he knew there was no way that he could do anything about asking me out until he'd found her a spot. If she was just a casual acquaintance type person he might have let her out the easy way, but he knew he couldn't do that to her because she'd been friends too long, she was a friend of the family by then. It dated back at least six years, maybe even more.

The wrestler always came with his manager, he was young and naive. I have a feeling that Buster knew Dorothy well enough to know that she would probably make the first move, and I have a feeling that that's probably what happened.

²³⁷[Dorothy Sebastian was 33-34 at this time.]

But as I say I wasn't paying any attention to this whole drama, y'know, I was busy playing bridge, what do I know, what do I care? She probably had the feeling that she had dumped Buster. I have a feeling that that's probably the way it worked out.

And he let her have that feeling?

Oh, of course.

That really is remarkably devious, don't you feel flattered that the only occasion anyone knows of Buster being devious was for you?

I guess. I don't know. Afterwards he took me out a couple of times for real dates, we went out to dinner, and floor show type situations, and then digressed right back to the bridge table I imagine. And we were dating, and I was in and out of the house for another full year before we got married.

September 1938, Joe Schenck's Twentieth Century-Fox engaged Buster as chief gagman for a series of B pictures featuring the 'Jones family'. Buster also created the storylines for many of them. Pay at \$300 per week. (Dardis)

1939-41. COLUMBIA CHEATERS.

1939

Any comments on the Columbia cheaters?

No, Except he did 'em just for the money, he made quite good money off of 'em. I saw a few of those, he made a batch of them before I ever went over to the studio. He hated them, but they paid the bills. I was there, towards the very end, the last few, and they were just awful. He made no bones about it, he did it just for the money, because they paid quite well. He knew they were no good, and there was no use arguing about it because Jules White who directed them had no talent. He was the one that made Sidewalks of New York which was the worst picture Buster ever made. So he knew there was no use talking about it, just take the money and run. As usual he was supporting his mother, brother and sister, and up to that point, me also, not me necessarily because I was always working, but nobody else was.

So you were dancing through all this?

Yuh. I worked right straight through until television brought an end to all musical comedies being made. I started working in 1934, and didn't quit until probably early fifties.

17. Pest from the West. (Remake of the Invader. Columbia (6/16/39), Dir. Del Lord.)

Lorna Gray, Gino Corrado, Richard Fiske, Bud Jamison, Eddie Laughton, Ned Glass, Forbes Murray.

International traveller Buster falls in love with fickle senorita Lorna in Mexico.

The Columbia series reunited him with Clyde Bruckman, who had been one of Buster's closest associates on the silent classics. Bruckman wrote some top-notch strips for Keaton, and his first film was directed by the top comedy man on the lot, Del Lord. The triple-threat combination was unbeatable, and The Pest from the West was one of Keaton's funniest films. It borrowed heavily from Buster's mid-30's feature An Old Spanish Custom, but Keaton, Bruckman, and Lord pulled out everything they had from their considerable bag of tricks and filled the two-reeler with bright bits of business.

The climax is worthy of Keaton's best silent films. Having pursued a lovely senorita, he finds himself confronted by her jealous employer, who challenges him to a duel at sunrise in the nearby forest.

"You come from the north, and I will come from the south," instructs the adversary. "and come shooting, because I am going to kill you!" No sooner does Buster digest this than the girl's lover appears,

demanding satisfaction. Buster thinks quickly and tells him that they will fight a duel the next morning. "You come from the south, and I will come from the north. And come shooting, because I am going to kill you!" Satisfied, Buster walks away and bumps into a paunchy native whom he has been annoying all day. Buster slaps him and tells the dazed fellow, "You come from the east." Next morning, lover and employer spy each other, shoot, and fall to the ground in comic-opera fashion. From behind a bush Buster, in World-War-One army regalia, and the senorita, dressed as a Red Cross nurse, appear. Buster surveys the situation and concludes, "Finis la Guerre!" tossing away his gun. Just then, the local opponent appears, guns loaded. "My husband!" shrieks the girl, and Buster takes off amid a flurry of bullets. Few of the other Columbia comedies reached this level, although some have their moments.

HOLLYWOOD CAVALCADE.

I did get one fascinating four-week assignment in 1939 when Twentieth Century-Fox made *Hollywood Cavalcade*, a story about making comedies in the old silent days. It starred Don Ameche and Alice Faye playing a Broadway show girl who comes to Hollywood believing she has been hired to play in dignified dramas. Instead she finds herself playing leads in Keystone Komedies.

My deal called for me to act in this and also to work as the director's comedy consultant.²³⁸ Not surprisingly, there were some pie-throwing episodes in the picture. "Alice Faye will catch one from you," Alan Dwan, the director, told me, "and you can also teach her and the others the secrets of the art."

I had not thrown a custard pie for years and lost no time in getting in some practice when not busy on the set.

I started by drawing a circle on the wall in white chalk. This was the approximate size of Alice Faye's lovely blonde head. I used a wooden plate as my practice 'pie'. When this proved too light I kept on driving nails into it until it weighed about as much as the custard pies Roscoe, Al St. John, and I had so much fun throwing at one another in the old days. I practiced throwing the plate from various distances. I have always considered myself the world's champion custard-pie thrower, and slowly my old marksmanship returned.

I had the studio's bakers make the pie according to our original 1917 recipe. No custard is used, and, with a blonde the target, the filling is a mixture of blackberries, flour, and water, garnished with whipped cream. When a brunette is the one to be smeared, a lemon-meringue filling is substituted for the blackberries, which shows up better on the screen against a dark complexion.

Two crusts are cooked, one inside the other, until brittle. The double crust prevents crumbling when your fingers slide across the bottom in delivering the confectionary.

Tin plates are never used because of the danger of cutting the recipient's eyes, something that could happen when the plate slides sideways at the crucial moment of impact. The shortest throw, across a distance of from three to six feet, is called a shot putt, and this was the custard-pie surprise I was to heave at sweet-faced Alice Faye.

I worried about her flinching. Besides spoiling the shot, this would mean hours of delay while Alice took a shower, got a whole new make-up job, a hairdo, and was fitted for a duplicate clothes outfit.

I decided not to warn her when the great moment approached. After talking it over with Dwan, we placed George Givot, who was playing the villain, between Alice and

²³⁸[This movie contains a number of stunning stunts by Buster, unfortunately shown undercranked for 'comic effect'.]

me. Givot faced me, but Alice, standing right behind him, was faced in the opposite direction. Givot was told that he should turn the girl around slowly as I started to say my line, which was,

"We will see who gets the girl!" He would hold her in front of him, using her as a shield. After timing this, using another girl for Alice, I suggested that if the word 'Now' was added, it would give me time to deliver the pie at just the right split second.

When we made the shot, Givot turned Alice around too quickly, which forced me to speed up my throw. Consequently the pie hit her harder in the face than should have been necessary.

You never saw a more stunned-looking girl in your life than Alice Faye that day. We required no retake, but Alice did not thank me for that. As the camera was being moved to the next location I saw her go over to a table on which the pies for other scenes were waiting to be used. Alice picked one up, weighed it in her hand, then tried several others. When she found one she liked she headed toward me on the run. I leaped up and ran, but Alice chased me off the sound stage and clear out of the studio holding all the while that menacing custard pie in her hand.

I think I proved I was still the champ custard-pie thrower during that picture when I caught George Givot squarely in the face with a pie from a distance of twenty-seven feet.

He had a wonderful time doing Hollywood Cavalcade, because Mal St. Clair was the director and he practically turned those whole sequences that he did over to Buster to direct and do, he did a lot of things, he did, remember the sequence where he rode the handlebars in Sherlock Junior? well he repeated that and a couple of other things that he did. And of course, he got to hit Alice Faye with a pie. And they just had a ball. She was crazy about him. I just saw her incidentally, at a big luncheon thing and we had our picture taken together. She looks great. She was talking about it, she still remembers getting hit with the pie. But he had a lovely time making that movie. We were going together at that time but we weren't married yet.

Gino Corrado challenges Buster to a duel in *Pest from the West*; they're fighting over Senorita Lorna Gray.



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE.

...on the upgrade once more.
1940. Marriage.

<1940>

[The following is me reading this book [I.E. all the following quotes bar Eleanor] to Eleanor, and her answering back. In future, any quotes not separated from Eleanor, including Buster, is this same read and response.]

So many good things happened to me during 1940 that I see that year now as the one in which my life started on the upgrade once more. I also started drinking again- which wasn't one of the good things of course.

For some time my friends had been assuring me that beer never hurt anyone. That is very easy to believe if you enjoy drinking beer as much as I do. The trouble with drinking beer is that it is such a short step to drinking whiskey. And each time I started drinking whiskey, I again could always find occasions to celebrate.

Who'd he tell all that? Blesh? Charlie Samuels?

It might be somebody's birthday, anybody's, even the cat's, or a holiday, St. Patrick's Day, St. Swithin's, Arbor day,²³⁹ Mother's Day, Father's day. If not, somebody was easily found who had just got out of the hospital, got married or divorced, lost his mother-in-law and wanted you to drink with him because he was happy or wanted to forget his sorrows. Refusing seemed positively rude.

Even so, in my opinion, you are all right as long as you can drink and wake up without a hang-over. You are still all right if you can fight off the tearing desire for an eye opener.

That's always been the killer in my life, that eye opener that brings such relief but doesn't last long enough, and leads you into taking another and another until you find yourself waking up with a hang-over all over again.

Keep it up awhile, and whenever a couple of things go wrong you find yourself saying 'The hell with it' and getting drunk to help you forget. And that's the final step that brings you to the police station or the psychopathic ward.

I was to go on many a bender in the next fifteen years though without ever getting into as bad shape as back in 1932 and 1933 when the roof fell in on me.

Oddly enough, I never got drunk while I was working. Always I was far too interested in what I was doing to take a chance on missing out on any of it. When idle and with no work in prospect, I could get as bagged as anyone else.

Yeah, he got drunk a few times after that, but he was dry the whole early part of the couple of years that I first knew him, and Myra said that he had been for a couple of years before that. I think that Charlie Samuels made a lot of nothing, you know what I mean. I'm not saying Buster did not drink, those words that he's put in Buster's mouth, it doesn't *sound* like it came out of Buster's mouth. Part of it, y'know. There's nothing *wrong*, it's just that it's better, more perfect english than Buster's speech would have been.

By that time the bad part was all gone. The worst part and the drinking was all over. He'd been dried out and on the wagon about four years before I ever met him. Actually you know there was so much written and said and rumours and

²³⁹Well, I know what it is, but I don't know why. It's where everybody is supposed to go out and plant a tree.

gossip about the drinking. He only actually, when you sit down and figure it out with a calender, he only was drinking heavily for about a year and a half. They used to be social drinkers, they'd drink fairly heavily but get up and go to work in the morning. But The Cameraman he was fine, Spite Marriage he was fine. It was after that that he started to go downhill.

Blesh: It has continued ever since, the incomplete vaudeville of starts and stops- the unfounded hopes and half-realizations, the memories half revived, the shuttle between past and present, here and Europe. The world will never know what to do with its living legends. More than mere anachronisms, they upset everyone- bitter rue for the old; insult and enigma, or will-o'-the-wisp for the young. Eleanor Norris, though barely twenty-one when she married Buster Keaton, must essentially have grasped all this.

I don't think I realized that at all. Perfectly normal to me.

Blesh: It was her first marriage. With all her admirers, she married a man of forty-five who, if anything, looked nearer sixty. No one, in 1940, was marrying Keaton for his money (he had none) or for his prospects (he seemed to have none) or for his fame (that had already withered).

It's all quite true. Of course, anybody that had been a big star and then had to work for a living as a writer, and work in lesser acting jobs, I wouldn't necessarily say they'd withered away, but Blesh may have thought so.

Blesh: Eleanor Norris Keaton proceeded immediately to go through hard times with her husband, hard times that soon amounted to near disaster. She weathered them out; she has seen Buster Keaton through a long period of painful adjustment and a dozen partial comebacks. She has carried him, content and at times happy, across the threshold of his seventies. She has lived with that most difficult and tragic of human beings, the exiled and estranged artist....

I hate that downbeat attitude of his. In the days when money was money, all the years from the time television started, which was '49, Buster averaged 53-55 thousand a year. Now that wasn't pennies in those days. That was a nice living.²⁴⁰ But Blesh, I mean, they've all got him starving in the gutter, and it just drives me crazy.

I mean, the suggestion is that he's not in contact with reality in some way.

Uhuh.

Blesh: She believes in justice and is content to wait for it, believes that 'truth crushed to earth will rise again.'

Well, if he was crushed to earth it was before I ever knew him.

Blesh: When Eleanor married Buster Keaton she had to look past a ravaged crag of a face...

I did not! He was still beautiful. He still had great bone structure and very few wrinkles. You look at pictures of the two of us when we first knew each other, he didn't even look his age. (see the wedding pictures for evidence.)

Blesh: He was a marooned Martian, but he was determined to survive.

It's just that Rudi lived in his own dream world I suppose. I don't know. They've got to make drama out of nothing. Blesh made his major living, I believe, as a critic and a teacher, coach, of jazz music. He worked at a college out in Long Island. His lady that lived with him for many, many years, not married, was the mother of Conrad Janis who was a top musician, and had been a child actor. So he was very involved with music at all times. He was a very likeable, nice man, socially. You see, the thing with Rudi, the book as written, as I read it, Buster wouldn't read it, he made me do it, and it was way, way longer, and as a result it sat for ten years. Nobody would publish it because he wouldn't allow them to edit it and cut it down. And finally, I don't really know whether it was shortly before

²⁴⁰[And how. I'd be thrilled to make \$1,000 U.S. a week right now, 1995.]

Buster died and we knew he was going, or very shortly after that he agreed to let them edit the thing. But the last ten years of Buster's life he put in two chapters tacked on the end, after Buster died. He said that he was only interested in silent film, and when silent pictures went out, he quit worrying about it, the end of the book.

So he managed to have a book radically too long, all about the silents?

Yeah.

How did he fill it?

I don't know. I mean I read it, but it was in the early nineteen fifties, I don't remember anything about it now.

Didn't it leave an impression on you, like a taste in the mouth?

Oh, I just knew that there was millions of horrendous mistakes, and the thing that impressed me the most was Buster would start telling him some funny story that happened on the set, or at somebody's house, one of those things, and by the time Rudi Blesh got through improving it it wasn't funny anymore, didn't make a lot of sense. He wouldn't leave it alone.

Would you agree that there has been, as yet, no acceptably true biography of Buster Keaton?

Uhuh.

May 29. Marries Eleanor Norris.

I proposed to him. I took the bull by the horns. We were in Palm Springs for new years eve, and we were dancing, and I said something about "When are we going to get married?" And he said, "How about tomorrow?" or something like that, so I said "Well, maybe not.." Then his next wonderful, brilliant idea was "How about May 28, because that's when I was married the first time, and I'll be able to remember it." I said, "Take your May 28 and shove it. I don't need that." So anyway it turned out that we were married May 29th. In any case it was within a period of a week or so. I picked May 29, so from new years eve until then is when we finally got married.

He said afterwards that the reason he hadn't asked me himself was that he was afraid he was too old for me.

And yet he went to all that trouble to jettison Dorothy...

Well, at the time I don't think he had marriage in mind, that was a year before.

I doubt that he was thinking of marriage at that point.

Blesh: Eleanor Norris finally said, "What's the law against our getting-"

- "Married," Buster said, and thus saved her face.

That was their version.

And now for the good things that happened to me during 1940. I'll start with the best of them, my marriage to Eleanor Norris, the dancer, on May 29 that year. I had been divorced five years. She was twenty-one, I forty-four. On hearing of our plans, a couple of my middle-aged friends took the liberty of advising Eleanor against marrying a man more than twice her age. They said no good could come of it. Their concern by the way was not for her, but for me.

He always seemed like he was helpless, and everyone assigned themselves to be his father, Joe Schenck did, his doctor, he had 2 or 3 mothers, but he just seemed like a helpless type that everybody thought he needed caring for.

When we decided to get married, his two best friends separately took me aside for about two hours each, and convinced me all the reasons why I should not marry him. The doctor, and the other friend, on two different occasions, lectured me severely about how wrong this whole thing was going to be, it wouldn't last, all of that. And the fact that if I was marrying him for his money, forget that, he didn't have it. And I, very polite nice little girl, I sat and I listened to everything they had to say very carefully, all of it, and ignored them. And then we went and got married.

Who were his two best friends?

One was his doctor, O'Donald, or Mick Donald ? and the other was A.C. Freud, I never really understood how he and Buster became so close except that they were both rabid bridge players, that might have been it, because he was a businessman from Detroit with a cute little English wife, little Annie, and she was a bad bridge player. Their son Ralph was the head of the Arts Department in school at U.C.L.A. for many years until he died. But that's beside the point. The other one, his doctor was a full bird army colonel, and had been Buster's doctor for many many years.

This seems to me meddlesome..

No. The thing is Buster had been involved with this Mae Scribbens, when he was drinking, Freud and the doctor had this in their mind when I came along. It was going to be that, or somebody taking advantage of their little kid. But they were protecting him from me. He'd had enough trouble, he didn't need me. Twenty-eight years later, if they'd been around, they would have been surprised I think. I doubt that they knew me that well, I don't suppose we ever had anything in the way of conversations, because any time you'd be sitting round a bridge table and somebody'd start to have a conversation, Buster'd say,

"Shut up and deal! You're wrecking the card game if you're going to talk." So you're not going to imagine that you're going to be getting too close to other people when you're not allowed to speak to them.(Laughs)

Having been brought up to respect her elders, Eleanor listened to the two middle-aged wise men, and we continued our plans for the wedding. I, myself, had one fairly good reason for hesitating about making that pretty girl my bride. For a good many years I had been going steady, as they say, with a beautiful woman who had been a star at M-G-M with me. We had been sweethearts for quite a long time, and I doubted whether she would take the news that I was marrying a younger girl in any truly christian spirit.

[laughter from E.K.]

Well, I saw no point in hurting either her feelings or getting my head broken. I spent a good deal of time trying to solve the dilemma. Eventually I recalled that my long-time girl had always shown a considerable interest in wrestlers. As an experiment I took her to a couple of wrestling shows at the Hollywood Stadium.

To my great joy she appeared utterly fascinated by one curly-haired young grappler. See, that's not Buster's dialog, he would never say 'curly-haired young grappler.'

Getting his manager to one side I told him that my companion was deeply interested in his boy and slipped him her telephone number to pass along to the muscular youth. Before Eleanor and I were married ourselves, my other girl and the wrestler dated, fell in love, and eloped. Eleanor and I have been happily married now [1960] for nineteen years, but you can bet I've never become sappy enough to take her to any wrestling matches.

I find that Dorothy and the wrestler eloping hard to believe. I think that's a little invention of Charlie Samuels. But it doesn't matter, since it doesn't concern Buster. I don't know that it's not true but I don't think it is. Buster could fantasize and make things up just as well as Charlie, and as I say, they were the only two involved in it, he never spoke to anybody else or wanted to know about anybody else.

At what point did you start to feel like becoming his wife?

I don't really know. It was so gradual, from the time Dorothy disappeared and he asked me to go out.... I was very nervous about going out with him on a date, we'd only been out in groups before. But to actually go out to dinner and a show, I remember feeling nervous about it. But we were not out in public that much. We were in and around the house all the time. After he asked me out to dinner and shows a couple of times, then it became a relationship rather than a friend hanging out at the bridge table, and it just developed from there. My interest developed more and more all the time, and I guess his must have been there the whole time, but this whole thing about him finding Dorothy Sebastian another avenue of exit so he could date me, I didn't find that out for a long time. As a matter of fact, it could have been as long after as him telling Samuels about it, because that was 1958. It probably wasn't that long, but in any case I was not aware of it. He never flat out told me any of this. I'm quite sure not. But after it reached the point that we were seeing each other practically every day, by the time I got the hang of playing bridge, I was one of the group that was there all the time.

So you became a kind of bridge addict?

Yeah. Except when I was working, or he was working. So it was just a steady thing until it got to that new year's eve when I said, "Enough already, when are we going to get married."

Was he surprised?

No. But he told me, after, he would never have bought it up himself because he thought I was too young, or he was too old, whichever way.

Most people will find that difficult to understand...

It didn't dawn on me at all, I didn't pay any attention to it. You see, I never had any teenage dating relationships really, because I went to work when I was fourteen, and if and when I got around to having a date, which wasn't all that often, it was probably an adult person. It wasn't a boy I went to school with or anything because I didn't know any of those. So it was probably somebody at least ten or fifteen years older than I was. So the fact that Buster was twenty years older didn't dawn on me or make any difference. I knew it but I didn't care.

As a matter of fact, young ones my age that I did meet, say like I was eighteen and I met an eighteen year old, it was like patting a child on the head. They were so immature and young compared to me at eighteen. Since I'd been on my own, working, taking care of myself, from the time I was fourteen, I was well into being an adult by the time I was sixteen, and here'd be boys running around at eighteen still in school. They had no interest for me.

Even so, when you are intending to marry a man, you must take into account surely that you are thinking of a long term future, and that the difference in ages will mean exactly this down the track, that he's not here and you are..

Well I always knew that was going to happen. Had to happen. Take what you can get for as long as you can.

That was your attitude?

Yes. He was perfectly hale and hearty until the last three or four months. Up until then he was fine, working, no problem. He had bronchitis, that was from too much smoking, but other than that he was healthy.

You didn't mind his smoking?

I smoked too in those days, not as much as him of course. I never was quite able to figure out how much he did smoke, because when he was home he would sit and play solitaire, or cards with other people, he spent a lot of time at the card table, even if he was alone he would play solitaire and watch television. And he'd light a cigarette and put it down and get busy doing something, he'd pick it up, it was gone, he'd put it out and started another. So if he went through two packs a day, I doubt that he smoked one, because they were just sitting there burning most of the time. Buster smoked too much, which is eventually, I presume, what killed him, since he died of lung cancer.

What was going through your head before you asked him?

Did I want to spend the rest of my life with him? And the only practical thought I had on the whole thing was whether the rest of the family was going to be there the whole rest of my life. As it turned out Myra says,

"Up and at 'em, we're going to move. We're going back to my house." She had people renting, and she gave them notice. They got out and she moved back and took Harry and Louise with her. She said,

"They deserve to be alone." and she packed them up and took them.

Where was he living?

In a little house out in a little community called Cheviot Hills, which was half way between 20th Century Fox and MGM. We were only alone then for a year and a half I guess. We stayed there from the end of May 1940, until after Pearl Harbor. We were supposedly being threatened by being bombed by the Japanese at that time. They were having air-raid drills, blackouts; they had spotted submarines off the coast, all of that junk, and everybody thought that there was a likelihood that we could be bombed. We were almost on the beach in Cheviot Hills, we were only about five miles from the ocean, and she was fifteen miles further in, so it was certainly a safer place to be if anything happened. And he wasn't about to leave her alone, and she wouldn't leave her house. It was a much safer place to be anyway because it was a good fifteen, twenty miles inland. He got frightened about leaving his mother alone in her house, and she wouldn't pack it in and come back and live with us, so he says

"Well, we'll have to go there then." So we put our little house up for sale and moved in with her. Then we lived back with them again but in her house. We stayed there until she passed away in '55 as a matter of fact. His Dad died in 1945 and his mother died in 1955, and that's when we sold her house and bought the farm out in Woodland Hills.

I know that for many modern readers the idea that a woman back then would make those decisions, to marry Buster, entirely off her own bat, because she wanted to, is a bit unbelievable, and the idea that you were then totally satisfied with what you got may be equally difficult for a modern reader to believe or understand.

It didn't bother me. None of that. He was working all the time anyway, he was on salary at MGM, I worked, there was no money problems. I didn't give a damn about his past, I don't care.

It was a wonderful wedding. We were married by Eddie Brand, judge Edward Brand, Harry Brand was Buster's studio manager, and this was their son. He had just been made a judge and we were his first marriage that he'd ever done.

It was in the City Hall in Los Angeles, in town. And Buster's agent and another friend, my mother and sister, Myra and Louise and maybe Harry, I don't know, that was it, that was the wedding party. We went down to judge Brand's office. My mother was very young and cute looking, and we started out with Edward trying to marry my mother to Buster, they looked like the right age group. (Laughs) That didn't work out, and about the time he finally got us lined up the way we were supposed to be, the big Los Angeles fire department was in the basement and they took off screaming, with the hook and ladder, six pieces of equipment all yelling and carrying on, not Buster and I but the rest of the group all ran to the window to see where they were going and what was happening. So we had to get that all organised and settled down again. And he's got the marriage license and he is a total wreck, and he's reading it off, shaking like a leaf. First of all he kept calling me Eleanor Morris, and he'd say,

"Do you, Buster," so forth and so on, and then he'd look down at the marriage license, and say,

"Do you, Joseph Keaton.." So he kept going between Joseph Keaton and Buster and me, Morris. He got all the names gummed up. I always swore that nobody will ever know that we were really married from that ceremony, it was such a mess. Then we went back to our house for the wedding reception thing, a few more people dropped in. We were going camping and fishing up in the mountains, and we had a station wagon all packed up and ready to go so we only stayed an hour or so and then we left. They were all busy getting drunk and having a wonderful time, so we just changed clothes and left. We put the traditional cut in the wedding cake and I think we took a piece with us. We were gone for like a week or whatever, I don't remember, but when we got back we found out that our St. Bernard pup, he was about a year old, had gotten onto the dining room table and practically eaten that whole cake. They said he was sick for three days, every time you looked at him he'd turn green. Myra says "I've saved this for you." The little bride and groom off the top was all that was left. Nobody else ever got a piece of the cake. The dog had totally ruined it.

I read somewhere, I can't remember if we did it or not, but I read somewhere that we had gone to an ice-cream parlor and had ice-cream sodas on the way back home to the house. It's entirely possible we did, because it was the middle of the afternoon, it was a nice warm day, but I'm not sure if we *really* did or if I just read it, if somebody did that for embellishment. That was quite a day. (Laughs.) It was funny. We were both of us certainly a lot calmer than the judge. I guess all weddings have their little hitches, but that one, I thought was spectacular.

And you never had any cause whatsoever to regret this?

No! I never had any problems with it. We had a wonderful twenty-eight years, counting the two years we weren't married in the beginning, I count it as twenty-eight years. We never fought, we always got along. One time, I can't remember what it was, but some job offer in the East I think it was, and I said, "Oh, that sounds like a lot of fun." It had to do with wherever it was we were going to go. The job didn't turn out well, he didn't have a good time doing it or whatever, and from then on it was all my fault that he'd gotten hooked into this terrible situation. So I never offered an opinion again. When these offers would come in, he'd say,

"What do you think? Do you think this, do you think that?" and I'd say,

"I don't know, it's up to you, it's your job, you're doing it." I never gave him an opinion again, ever, on his jobs, where to go or what to do. He either said 'yes' or 'no' on his own. I was not about to get into one of those things again where it was my fault because it wasn't good.

How did he express it being your fault, I mean, did he give you the impression that he didn't let go of it?

Oh, he let go of it, he just blew up and got angry and yelled about it.. I can't remember what it was.. I wiped it out of my mind because I didn't like it, didn't like to be yelled at; but he yelled, because it was all my fault that he'd gotten into this situation when he'd rather be home playing cards or whatever. Y'know, big serious thing, but.. other than that.. it's the only time I can ever remember him blowing up seriously and blaming me.. You'd think I could remember, but I don't.

Most audiences will find it entirely unbelievable that you've dredged through your memory and only found one occasion when he shouted at you. No other problems at all?

I just never made the mistake of trying to tell him what to do after that, just because it appealed to me. Like someplace I'd never been and I thought it would be fun to go there, those kind of things. I'd be working with him probably too. After that it became his decision. I saw no reason for him to be upset if he didn't have to be, like being in something he didn't like. For instance, when they first produced 'Waiting For Godot', the Beckett play, he was Beckett's choice for Lucky, he's the one that's on the end of the rope through the whole show and has one big long speech at the end of the play. And they sent the script up. Buster says,

"Here.." he never read anything, I always had to do it. So I sat down and read it, and I said,

"I dunno." Of course Beckett never made any sense to me anyway and I said, "I can't make any sense out of this thing. I have no idea what it's about. All I know is that you don't speak until you have the last speech in the show, and it's about two or three pages long, it's a great long speech that you'll have to memorize thoroughly. I don't know that it makes any sense to me, I don't know if it will make any sense to you. All I can tell you is that you'd better read at least part of this to see if you can figure it out." And he says,

"No thanks, just call Ben and say No." Ben Pearson was his agent. "Call Ben and say we won't do it.." I called Ben and I said,

"I don't like it, and from what I've told him he doesn't like it, so he says to tell him No." And that was the end of that. I have no idea who finally did it, it was a New York actor that I didn't know. But it was I guess a successful show, it ran for a year or more, but when they get super-intellectual and artistic with me they lose me.

Did Buster like to read, watch movies..?

Buster liked any good, well made film, no matter what type, whether it was comedy, drama, or anything else. Books, for casual reading he loved mystery stories. He liked plays and musicals, but preferred musicals, Broadway musicals. He liked a little bit of everything on TV, up to and including the news a lot.

How tall was he actually?

Buster was exactly five foot five tall.

Any particular favorite foods?

His favorite foods were, almost anything, there were very few things he did dislike. He liked food of all kinds. He didn't drink tea to speak of at all, but he did like coffee, and soda, and in all his later years he would have a glass of beer as cocktail before dinner, but no more than one.

One gets the impression that you must have shared your lives with a pack of dogs...

We only ever had one dog, all the time at Woodland Hills we only had one dog and one cat, well excuse me, she got pregnant and we had a cat and kittens, and then she left Elmer to raise them. He helped raise them. She had them out in the barn in the hay. Anyway, when the kittens were about three weeks old, Elmer decided they were old enough to travel, and decided they should live in the house, so he comes parading in with one in his mouth, and I was in the kitchen

doing something and I hear this *squeak*.!.... I took it away from him and dried it off, and took it back out. Then a day or two later we came home and we had an outside door to the den that opened into the driveway and I opened the screen door to go in that way, and he'd put one between the solid door and the screen door. That's as far as he could go because the door was shut, so I retrieved that one and took it to the barn, and a couple of days later my neighbour called and she said,

"Would you please come and get your kitten, I don't want..." He'd gone over there and knocked on her back door, and she opened the door and he came in and plopped a kitten in the middle of her kitchen floor. And she says, "Elmer, I don't want your kitten, now get out of here." So she pushed him out and then called for me to come and get the kitten back. So eventually we gave them all away of course but we had a problem with him bringing them in the house. He didn't want them out in the barn for some reason, he thought they should be in the house with people.

Was Elmer 2 any relation to Elmer 1?

No. Well Myrtle was inbetween as a matter of fact, Buster had a female when I first met him, I never knew Elmer 1. She was with us all the early years, and when we moved in to Myra's and sold the house, our friend had a big 35 acre orange ranch down in Santa Anna and she went down there to live, and she lived to be about sixteen years old which is *extremely* old for a St. Bernard, but she was very small, and she was always an outdoor dog with a lot of exercise, good food and all. Nanny Reid, can't tell you her real first name, she was always Nanny, and Jack Fredericks who was a football player, played with the Los Angeles football team and had gone to U.C.L.A. I believe, played football there. Somehow he was a friend of Buster's, I don't know how they ever met, possibly through football, and he had lived with her for years, he was an orphan and she helped raise him, so we used to go down there for the weekends and stay over and play bridge, she was an avid bridge player too. And so when we moved into the city Myrtle went down there to the ranch. Then Elmer 2 was born in '55 or '56 when we moved to the valley, that's when we got him as a baby.

Was the choice of name sarcastic?

He liked the name Elmer, he used Elmer in quite a few films, those short subjects, you'll find Elmer popping up in those things. Somehow he felt that name suited his character, and suited St. Bernard people too.²⁴¹ He liked the name, so when we got Junior later, when Elmer 2 died and we got Junior, he was going to call him Elmer, I said,

"No, enough already, he can be Elmer Junior but I'm going to call him Junior." So that was why we had Junior and quit having Elmers, because I put my foot down, I said,

"Every St Bernard in the world doesn't have to be named Elmer."

How did you get on with his mother?

Oh fine. No problem. We all got along... His brother didn't like me at all, 'cause I didn't like him. The feeling was mutual. Number one, he never worked a day in his life. He was a *leach*. And he was mother's spoiled baby, and she protected him with her life. Louise was the youngest, but she wasn't the spoiled baby, Harry was. So I had no respect for him whatsoever. He used to insist on doing all the shopping, the grocery shopping, and taking the cars to be gassed, oiled, greased, whatever you do to cars, and he'd always take money to do that. Nobody ever saw a dime of change from him, ever. All the money that he could

²⁴¹[Both Eleanor and Buster refer to St. Bernards as "St Bernard people".

scrounge, above what he spent on groceries, whatever he was buying, went in his pocket for his beer money. There was a bar up the street where he used to spend his evenings, and that's the way he lived. And when Myra died, and we put the house up for sale, and bought our new house, Louise was living there too, we were all together there, the first thing Louise did the day we put the house up for sale she went and got herself an apartment, 'cause she was working all the time, and went right on with her life; he stayed till the moving van backed up and took the furniture away. And then, I understand

, we never saw him for a long time, but Louise found out later that he almost starved to death on the streets, 'cause he would *not* look for a job or anything else. He had a lady friend used to give him like one meal a day, or at least a couple of times a week she would give him a big meal. And he literally almost starved for a year or more until he finally moved clear down by Mexico, below San Diego and got a job as a daytime bar-tender, 'cause all he had to do was pour beer, he didn't have to really mix drinks. He stayed with that I guess until he died. I only ever saw him once after that until, I think he came up for Buster's funeral. He got a friend to drive him up. But I only ever saw him one time after that. After Buster died Louise wanted to go down and see how he was and everything, so we went together. He used to get her a room in the motel and she'd stay overnight. And I guess the minute he saw me, he bought us coffee, and said

" Well, I've gotta go." and he walked us back out to the car and left. And that hurt her, *a lot*. I didn't care, I didn't want to be around him anyway. But, see, he was so spoiled.. when sound pictures were starting to come in they started a sound school, and Norma Shearer got her brother in, Buster got Harry in and however many others, I don't know, and they were to go to school to learn to be sound technicians, and Harry would get in his car and go off every morning and it was three weeks before they found out he'd never been there, that wasn't good enough. And of course Doug Shearer became the top sound man of MGM, making thousands and thousands of dollars. That wasn't good enough for Harry. I never worried about it, but people that knew him well said that he always wanted to be a big star like Buster, and if he couldn't do that he wouldn't do anything. That was other peoples version of the way he thought. I don't know that....Harry looked like Buster, except he was blue-eyed and blond where Buster was dark with dark hazel eyes, but the features were the same. Louise was a doll, she was a fun little gal, liked to play tennis...

A doll?

A sweet wonderful person is a doll.

Buster wrecked what could have been a good career for her; because she was a *funny* lady. She could have been as funny as Buster with the proper material and direction. Do you remember Edna May Oliver? A character lady, all prim and proper type? Anyway, Louise was a very young Edna May Oliver. She worked quite a bit and could have gotten quite a bit of work and Buster practically put a stop to it, because he didn't want people to think he wouldn't, couldn't support his family. He always had, he supported everybody all their lives, and he thought it was a reflection on him that Louise would have to go out and go to work. It never dawned on him she wanted to. She wasn't brave enough to try to convince him that she wanted to. That was before me, at the time I didn't know them. Well, I guess he practically told her not to, and since she was living under his roof I guess she obeyed him. She didn't work often enough, or

make enough money that she could go out on her own I guess. Do you remember the Doctor Christian movies? It was a whole series. Doctor Christian was Jean Hersholt, character actor, and he made, oh, at least twelve or fourteen of them. Louise was a nurse in those, his office nurse... she worked in quite a few of those, maybe she was a hospital nurse, but anyway I can remember visualising her in a white uniform. And she could have done very well, but at the time she wasn't doing well enough to disobey Buster. She would have felt obligated to move out and everything and she wasn't making enough money to do all that. Middle and late thirties, She wasn't working when I started going up there to play cards, in '38 she wasn't working. So it must have been '36, '37, and maybe part of '38.

Surely at that point Buster wasn't making an enormous amount of money?

No, he probably wasn't making a lot at that time. I know he got...

So to an extent one could say it would be false pride on Buster's part?

Oh it was! I mean, he'd supported them forever, he bought his mother a house, and supported Louise and... The only one he objected to was Harry, because Harry refused to do anything for himself, and he also blew this big opportunity that Buster.. Buster got him two or three different jobs, good type stuff like that, that he wouldn't do, so naturally Buster resented that. But his little sister, it was another story. He didn't see any reason why she should go out to work, she was a girl.

So we're talking a very old fashioned attitude..[interruption, bother.]...

This is all very interesting, because it is practically impossible to get any information about his family after the vaudeville period..

But you see, people that were writing about him were not interested in the rest of the family, except possibly Natalie and her two kids.

Joe was a wonderful character, I just loved him. By the time I knew Joe, he hadn't had a drink in thirty years, he was a sweet darling man. We used to have on our front door at the house, one of those door latches that you push down, instead of turning a knob you push down; he never opened that with his hand in his life, he'd walk up and go 'Chunk!!' with his toe and open the door. He did all kinds of silly, fun things like that. And always 'Little Bussy',

"How's my little Bussy?" and (laughs) of course little Bussy's in his forties by now. Oh, he was cute, I loved him. He came for every sunday, his whole life he came for sunday dinner, with Myra and Louise, the whole family, it was family dinner on sunday.

Joe and Myra hadn't lived together all those years. Joe lived in an old theatrical hotel downtown L.A. with other retired vaudeville people, and the owner of the hotel was a retired vaudeville person. And they all lived there, buddy chum pals, y'know. And they all knew each other. Joe had his car, and he would come out every sunday. Joe had a ladyfriend he'd had for many many years, and she'd come occasionally too. She was a real nice lady. I don't remember her name. She's been gone for years. She went long before Joe did. Joe died in '45, and she died a couple of years before that.

Joe was six foot or six foot one, and Harry got quite a bit, he was five ten or eleven, and Buster stayed with Myra's side of the family and stayed little. Myra was four foot ten and Louise was five foot even, and Buster was five five, but Buster got his father's coloring and Louise did too, where Harry went to the blond blue-eyed, Myra's side of the family, so it's kind of a mix-up. Like Buster's two boys, Jimmy, the older one is absolutely like Buster to the last fingernail, from the neck down, same size, everything; but he's got the Talmadge face. Now

Bob, who is six foot tall and Buster's coloring, has Buster's face. Strange how the genes get all confused and mixed up.

Did Buster like cats?

Yes he did. When I first met him he had two cats. One was called Wednesday, I guess 'cause they got her on wednesday, and the other was Lee Francis, she was a leading Madam in those days, in San Francisco or L.A., so the cat was named after her. Wednesday was obviously pregnant, and we kind of missed her for a whole day and went looking around, we heard her meowing and Buster finally tracked it. Over the bedroom there was a false chimney that matched the real one to balance the roof, and she'd made her nest to have her babies there. She'd gone in there to sleep and the babies shifted and she couldn't get out because it was just a small little hole, a little pipe thing. So Buster had to get a big ladder and cat food and milk and trekked up to the chimney twice a day for two days until she had the babies. Then she could get out. Then he fished the babies out and brought them down and we got her established in a box in the house. But he spent two days going up and down the ladder with cat food and milk for her.

(laughs)

It sounds like the sort of thing that could only happen to Buster Keaton, it's almost too good to be true. In a sense, there's always this argument about life imitating art or vice versa, and I'm loath to use the word art because I know Buster wouldn't have liked it about what he did, at the same time the bottom line is that it has to be called art; how much do you think it was his life appearing in the movies, albeit in a different guise, in a different personality, and how much the other way round?

I don't know, everything he came in contact with would automatically become a prop. He would be all alone out in our backyard, and a garden hose would get twisted, and the water would quit running except a drip, you know, any inconsequential thing could give him an idea and he'd wind up working out a whole sketch, that would start with this kink in the garden hose. So everything became a prop and an idea for him and he didn't care who was around and whatever... One time we were crossing the ocean on the Ile De France over new years, it was I think 127 passengers, we left the day after christmas and new years eve was in the middle of the ocean, and Paul Gallico was on that trip with us, the writer, we were in the big room after dinner, and Gallico and I were dancing, and Buster wandered off, and all of a sudden I said, "Oh Lord look!" At the end of the big main hall was solid glass two storeys high all the way across the room, with a couple of doors to go in and out, but it was a beautiful big expanse of glass, and Buster was outside the glass in the hallway, got his handkerchief out and he's polishing spots off that window. All by himself. He didn't care if anybody else was looking. In fact as it started out nobody was looking at him. But he decided the glass needed polishing so he was out there doing it. By the time he got through half the room had stopped dancing and everything else and just watching him. But he didn't do it for effect and he didn't care whether anybody cared or not. But he used to do things like that. He'd get an idea and he'd act on it.

He was an observer of society which gave him ideas, particularly, obviously mechanical things, new inventions; most of Buster's new ideas would follow new inventions, new media, new type of things that come into the world, 'cause then he'd get twenty ideas for things that he could work with, to do in a film. Because he did work with props a great deal. Without that kind of thing there weren't that many great and wonderful new ideas to come by.

If he hadn't of been a comic, he'd have been a civil engineer, he used to build wonderful things. I don't know why but nobody ever took pictures of any of these things, or if they did they took them for their own use and we never saw them.

His model railroads were absolutely wonderful. He built his own villages out of balsa wood, and painted them. They were pictures. That was his major hobby. They have big hobby shows here occasionally and he submitted bridges that he built. Somebody else told him to or did it for him. He built San Francisco Bay Bridge, it was actually the length of this table, [about four feet] out of balsa wood and wire. It was an absolutely beautiful thing. And then he built an old fashioned train trestle, like wooden logs, like you'd see in an old movie. I don't remember what division it was but both the bridges won first prize at this hobby fair with thousands of entries.

But it's also, to a mathematician or a licensed qualified highly educated engineer, it's astonishing that he could do things like that. He was never educated, never went to school. They don't know how he could do it. It cost them thousands of dollars to find out how to do it, and the fact that he could just do it was unbelievable.

Surely that's called talent?

Uhuh. They just don't understand, they didn't understand.

I get the feeling that they still don't.

Probably not.

Another big 1940 event in my life came on the day I decided to quit making cheaters at Columbia. I just got to the point where I couldn't stomach turning out even one more crummy two-reeler.

The next morning I drove over to M-G-M and saw my old friend, Eddie Mannix, I told him how I felt about what I'd been doing and asked him if he could put me on the payroll as a gagman and comedy constructionist.

"I can put you on at \$100 a week."

"It's a deal." I told him.

I am always surprised when people ask me if I didn't feel it was a comedown to take a job like that at such a small salary at the studio where I'd been a \$3,000-a-week star. The answer is 'No'. I had not the slightest sense of humiliation. For one thing, I'd had ten years to forget my old grievances. For another, I never had the sort of pride many actors are afflicted with. Like me, many of them had once been stars. They said they preferred to starve to death rather than accept a small-paying job. I do not know whether any of them starved or not, but the Hollywood hills are certainly always swarming with them.

'The producer hereby employs the writer for the purpose of writing 'gags' or incidental dialog.' [Snippet of contract.]

Lewis Jacobs, fellow writer at MGM: Buster was.. "a sad and lonely figure stuck in a writer's cell. He had a ukelele and sat strumming and singing all day long- one sad little song, over and over: 'If you're through, say you're through.'" (Turk and Ahlert, 'You never did that before' from 'Doughboys')

Is that likely?

No. And I never heard of the song. I can remember him when he had that first little office all by himself, but that was just a short time until he and Ed Sedgwick moved in together into a much bigger area with two rooms instead of one. I can remember the office, but I don't remember him sitting there with a ukelele and feeling sorry for himself.

Lewis Jacobs, fellow writer at MGM: "It seemed to me that they were buying off their own consciences- at a hundred bucks a week. He was one of the skeletons in the MGM closet. The older writers said that Buster Keaton saved the studio in the critical days. Made millions for them. Metro sold glamour, a streetwalker in lingerie made out of hundred dollar bills. No crueler industry exists, and no company crueler than Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. No feeling for art, no feeling for artists, no feeling for people as such. The moment they stop earning money- and the experts see to that- out they go. You watch it and still can't believe it. Buster Keaton is a genius- and MGM can't use him! The older and sadder he got, the more touching and compelling became the clown. That's what you call aborting art..."

When Eddie put me on at a \$100 a week I thought it was a darned nice of him. We could live on that, and I was sure M-G-M would raise my pay the moment I started giving them gags and comedy ideas they could use. And that's what happened: before long I was getting \$300 a week.

He was getting 300 a week when we were first married. He was getting a hundred when I first knew him, but when we got married he was up to three, because I'd known him two years before we actually got married.

Bill Cox: "A reporter, who should have known better, asked him how it felt to be making three hundred dollars a week where he used to make three thousand; and Buster said "Well, if I'm worth more, they'll pay me more."

What I used to say that used to drive Bill Cox, a good friend of ours, mad, Bill would say 'Something, something, something.' and Buster would say "I see." And I obviously picked that up, because after Buster was gone a year or two, Bill would say whatever, and I'd say "I see." And he'd say "Don't Do that !" (laughs) and I was doing it without realising it. I probably did it while he was alive as well, but nobody paid any attention. But Bill picked up on it afterwards because Buster wasn't there to say it himself.²⁴²



²⁴²[Here is a perfect example of the difficulties inherent in translating speech to print. Obviously it is the dry, almost dull, slightly wicked inflection that gives this phrase point. Equally it could be pronounced a million other ways in other mouths.]

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR.

...trouble shooter...

1940>47. Pearl Harbor. The Villain.. Summer Stock.

Among the M-G-M star comics I failed to click with were Abbott and Costello. I also got nowhere with the Marx Brothers. But I still think a gag I devised for the Marxes' *A Day At The Circus* was as sure-fire and amusing as anything I ever dreamed up for my own pictures. In this shot, Harpo is selling gas-filled balloons. Standing next to him is a midget on a side-show platform. When a customer buys a balloon and hands Harpo a ten-dollar bill, he hands the other balloons to the midget to hold for him while he fishes in his pockets for change. But the midget is not heavy enough to hold onto the balloons which rise in the air, carrying him off his feet. Harpo, who has given the customer his change, grabs the midget's ankle just as he is flying beyond reach, takes back the balloons. Then, without looking at the midget, he makes a slapping gesture as though he blamed the midget for not weighing enough.

After this shot Harpo walks past a camel. It has two baskets hanging on its back. A man with a pitchfork is filling these with straw. Harpo can see this but not the keeper on the other side of the camel who holds the reins attached to the animal's halter.

Some of the straw falls out of the basket nearest Harpo. He picks the straw up and throws it back into the basket. Meanwhile the keeper he cannot see is looking in his pockets for a match. Harpo finds a single straw on the ground and throws this into the basket just as the keeper bends over to strike the match on his trousers, accidentally pulling on the halter and causing the camel to sink to his knees.

Amazed at this apparent proof that there is a last straw that breaks the camel's back, Harpo takes back the single straw just as the keeper straightens up, loosening the rein on the camel who rises to his feet. Now Harpo is delighted: the ancient aphorism is based on truth.

When I acted this out for the Marx Brothers, Groucho asked with a sneer, "Do you think that's funny?" Harpo and Chico just stared at me in disgust. "I'm only doing what Mr. Mayer asked me to do, You guys don't need any help."²⁴³

Woody Allen: "Did you know Keaton?"

Groucho Marx. "Yeah."

Allen: "Did you find him funny?"

Groucho: "Yeah. He used to work for Harpo when we were at M-G-M. He put in gags."

Allen: "Did you think he was funny in his movies?"

Groucho: "Yes. I thought *The Navigator* was great."

The minute you started a picture with the Marx Brothers you hired three assistant directors, one for each Marx Brother. It was an *event* when you could get all three of 'em on the set at the same time. Get two of 'em, and while you went to look for the third, one of the first two would disappear. They never worried what the next set-up was gonna be, or what routine or anything else. They just said, "We'll ad-lib it when we get there."

The Marx Brothers, he admired some of their work, but he was irritated with their work habits, because you always had to go round them up and look for them one at a time, when it came time to shoot a scene they'd be off doing seven other things somewhere else.

²⁴³[Having just seen 'At the Circus' again, I can honestly say that this sequence would have helped it. It needed help.]

The one mistake the Marx Brothers ever make is that they're sometimes ridiculous.

Now, I try to think of a few of the thrills of my lifetime which I have not mentioned here. One came the day my two sons- then sixteen and fourteen years old- knocked on my door to shake hands and say

"Hello." Jim, the older one, had just got his driver's license, and the first ride he took with his brother was to my house. I had not seen them since they were in Black-Foxe Academy.

From that day on I had my own boys back again. And any worry I had about them growing up spoiled was eased during World War II. They served in the Navy as frogmen and also did demolition work in one-man submarines. Bob had the lobe of his ear knocked off by a sniper.

They were in those little mini-submarines in the South Pacific. Jim was at the house practically the day after he got back after the end of the war, and brought Barbara and Jim Junior, who was then about nine months old. She was pregnant when he left, and then they were always... Bob never used to come out as much as Jimmy, but Jimmy was there all the time, he still calls me, I just got through talking to him, every mother's day,

"Hi Ma! How are you. Happy mother's day."

His biggest joy in life was if we would go somewhere, to the theater or something like that, he'd be in the lobby waiting and he would deliberately be clear over the far side, as far away as he could get and he'd say,

"Hey Ma! " so forth and so on. I'd say,

"Yes Son! What?" He used to just get hysterical, he's only six years younger than I am you see, and Bobby was seven and a half or eight years younger. Oh, he just loved to call me 'Ma' in public, one of the joys of his life. He's cute. I'll be seeing him in July. He never comes down here anymore, he hates Los Angeles. He lives in Santa Inez which is about twenty-five thirty miles north of Santa Barbara up the coast. Beautiful horse territory, horse country. We have three dog shows up there in July, so we'll probably take the trailer and I'll go up and I'll see him there. His kids are all married and living elsewhere.

They would come for dinner.

You know the strangest part of the whole thing, Natalie's main reason for divorcing Buster, she claimed in court and whatever, was his drinking, Buster's drinking drove them apart and ruined the marriage. Well, she died as a total alcoholic in a sanitarium, and had been for quite a few years. Of course before that she had collapsed and everything. They used to have to keep her locked up and try to keep her away from the booze, and her friends would smuggle it in to her. Alcoholism, and that was supposedly why she left him. And that was the last six or eight years of her life.

Constance wasn't into anything very heavy, but Norma was.. drugs, because she was the wealthiest one of all, and her last husband, Dr. Carvel James kept her hopped up and putting papers under her nose to sign, to where finally she signed away practically everything of her estate to him before she died. And basically, Jimmy and Bobby were the major heirs of her estates and Constance's estates, the boys are wealthy. Carvel James got most of her estate so whatever was left it didn't matter whether Bobby and Jimmy split it or not, I mean, there was still a chunk but nothing compared to what it should have been. Of course, he was into

drugs too, but not as bad as he pushed her into it. Jimmy told me all of this, because they were with them a lot. The last year of Norma's life, Carvel James, they lived in Las Vegas, and Jimmy and Barbara used to drive up and visit them and everything. He was the one that told me that about the drugs. There was never any publicity or anything written about it, of course in later years nobody cared about her anyway. But Constance was never heavy into drinking or drugs or anything like that. She lived in New York all her later years, and the boys were crazy about her and she was crazy about them. But the reason they became their major heirs was changing their names to Talmadge. Jimmy was twelve and Bobby was ten when they took them to court and had their name changed legally to Talmadge. So when Bob had his sons, he had two sons who both had Keaton as a middle name, and then they went to court after they were adults and had the Talmadge chopped off so they're Bobby Keaton and Tommy Keaton. Michael Keaton and Dianne Keaton are neither one Keatons, they both took that name, they're neither one a real Keaton.

Constance had an enormous amount of money of her own from film and everything else. Constance was the wealthiest of all when she died. Her last husband was, I believe, in the stock market, and he took her money and he tripled and quadrupled it, so she was very wealthy by the time she passed on. Bobby did own property and raised donkeys or something, outside of Reno, he had a pure hobby ranch there. He worked hard at it. Jim, after the war, worked in publicity at Twentieth Century for a couple of years, and then he got out of that. They've never, either one of them ever had to work, they have too much money. Jim now lives up in central California and Bobby lives in Del Mar.

The Bourbon Railway...

The thing he built for his mother was out of an old-fashioned erector set, which was metal toys that you put together.²⁴⁴ It was a creation that went from one end of the room to the other and delivered a drink to his mother. And it was fun, he used to show that to people when they came in to the house. That was way back when I first knew him.

"Lunch is being served in the diner."

"The railway runs only for you." Buster to Myra Keaton.

I also knew that whenever an acting job came my way the company would give me time off for it. And I again got such jobs occasionally, usually for a day's work, at a \$1,000. a day. I had one of those one-day jobs that very fall in *The Villain Still Pursued Her*.

THE VILLAIN STILL PURSUED HER.1940.

Dir. Edward Cline.

This was a screen version of *The Drunkard*, the old stage melodrama which was revived in Los Angeles more than fifteen years ago and is still running there. [1960] I played a waiter who dropped a tray of dishes, something almost anyone will do for nothing. But the producer wanted a familiar face in that little bit and picked mine as the movie face hardest for fans to forget.

²⁴⁴[Erector is the American version of Meccano.]

That was a feature. It was a play that ran here for twenty-five or more years. You went in, and it was a play on a stage done as they would do it in the gay nineties, and you could have beer or soft drinks, or whatever else you wanted, and popcorn.. and you were obligated to hiss the villain and cheer the hero and all of that, that was part of the act. And everybody that ever came from out of town, that's where you took them because it was a fun evening. So somebody decided to put it on film. Well, they did the exact duplicate, but it was deadly on film without that audience and all the silly stuff.. but everybody in it was names, it was really fun. Buster was the hero's friend John that explains all the plots in asides. Anita Louise was the leading lady, Hugh Herbert was in it, Allan Mowbray was the villain, very villainous. Everbody in it was wonderful, and it was fun, but it was a deadly picture to look at because all the fun was gone if it wasn't live with an audience. So it wasn't a success. Whoever decided to make it should have known that.

L'I'L ABNER.

Buster was Lonesome Polecat. It was all from the funny papers, Al Capp's comic strip of Little Abner, they took the whole thing from that to make the movie. And I think it was probably very big with childrens audiences, but I don't remember it being a big success. But Buster was all browned up with a black wig and a feather, breechcloth, big moccassins. He usually enjoyed working.

Though my principal job at M-G-M was as a trouble shooter who rushed in with gags whenever needed, I got a bit to do once in a while on the studio's pictures. And the company, I must say, was most generous with their bonuses for this work.

I did my best work on the Red Skelton pictures, though, generally speaking, my suggestions were far more graciously received by M-G-M's dramatic performers than by my fellow comedians. Perhaps this is not surprising, but it sure surprised me. I cannot imagine Chaplin, Lloyd, Harry Langdon, or myself rejecting or resenting a first-rate gag just because another comic suggested it. But then, as I've mentioned, our approach to our work was quite different from theirs.

I now discovered that they never saw a script until it was completed. It was almost routine for them to return the first version to the studio with the notation, 'This stinks.'

The studio would then assign a couple of new writers whose effort, more often than not, would be returned as

'Not up to par!' or with some similar comment. When an acceptable script was whipped up, the comedian asked,

"When do we start and what do I wear?"

That would be The Marx Brothers, people like that. Skelton *loved* having Buster around, giving him ideas. He did practically everything Buster ever suggested, but The Marx Brothers didn't. I think Buster would probably, he never went into any detail except to say that they brushed him off, but see, Groucho was the boss of that group, and what Groucho said went, the oldest brother and the head comic, Buster, if he had an idea it would be for the scene and the total people in the scene, it wouldn't be a person, like Harpo, but he was brushed off, so nothing happened. He worked with Abbott and Costello quite a bit, and he and Lou got along fine, Abbott was just a straight man anyway. Abbott of course was an epileptic, and he used to drink approximately a quart of whiskey a day, and that

kept his seizures down. If he gave up his booze he would have seizures, but if he kept an even keel with the whiskey he wouldn't have seizures.

Abbott and Costello; they says

"When do we come and what do we wear?" Then they find out the day they start to shoot the picture what the script's about. Didn't worry about it, didn't try to.

Well that used to get my goat because my God, when we made pictures we *ate*, *slept* and... dreamed 'em.

I have been told that Phil Silvers, Jerry Lewis, and Jackie Gleason are among the comedians now popular who work from the beginning on their stories, and I hope it is true. But I never worked with any of the three. One of the equally famous comics I did work with hardly could wait to finish a scene. He had a big-stakes poker game going on in his dressing room which he was much more interested in than his picture. The men he played with dressed, acted, and talked like mobsters.

Another great comic would not even watch the scenes in his pictures that he did not appear in. He was more interested in getting back to his dressing room so he could write jokes for his radio show.

That's Red Skelton.

And so it went.

To say that any of these enormously popular comics was not a really funny man would be ridiculous. Writers, directors, advisers, and material can help you get to the top. What no outsider can supply is the rare talent to make people laugh. This the comic was born with and developed himself, or he would never have gained recognition in the first place. It just seems to me that for a man with such a rare and irreplaceable talent not to use it fully is like throwing away your birthright.

See, his heart and soul was in his work, they'd play between pictures, y'know, they'd finish a picture, they'd play for a month, do whatever they wanted to do, go to Europe or.. but when they came into that studio to work, they all worked like slaves to get everything done properly as best they could. They had no other thoughts in their head at anytime, they'd go home with it and come back to the studio with it. Social life was almost non-existent.

I can hardly think of one star on the M-G-M lot whom I did not work with during my years as a trouble shooter there, or one top director or producer.

In various pictures I showed Lana Turner how to get a laugh spilling a cup of coffee on Mickey Rooney,

That would have probably been an Andy Hardy, when she first started.

tutored Van Johnson how to get his bicycle's sprockets tangled up in Judy Garland's dress,

That was Good Old Summertime.

and helped Clark Gable work himself into a state of bewildered frustration.

Gable was a perfectly relaxed normal type guy, he was another no ego person.

The Gable picture was a whale of a yarn called Too Hot To Handle. In this Clark, one of the best-liked and easiest-to-work-with stars in Hollywood, was playing a lazy, cynical newsreel cameraman. Though assigned to cover the Japanese-Chinese war, this character had no intention of risking his neck at the front.

One scene I worked on produced as natural a gag as I ever saw. In this Gable was faking a scene showing the horrors of war. He had a four-year-old boy sitting on the ground, playing with gravel. Gable made a paper aeroplane and was trying to

photograph this in such a way that its shadow- the supreme symbol of destructiveness in war- would cross the little boy's face.

To heighten the effect of a helpless little victim caught in a bombing attack, he had placed some dirt and debris on the limbs of a tree under which the child was at play. When he shook the tree- at the right moment- the debris would fall on the tiny victim. For an additional effect he had a bucket full of dirt on the end of a wooden board. That end rested on the ground; the middle of the board was propped on a rock, which left the other end a foot or so above ground. This was close to Gable's foot, and by stepping on it he could send the bucket of dirt flying into the air and make it come down all over the little boy under the tree. If this worked, he could ship the film home as an incident during a bombing attack and stall off going to the front.

In the scene a slightly older boy was watching Gable's elaborate faking of the horrors of war with admiring smiles. He was continually annoying Gable by getting in his way. Gable kept moving this second boy out of his way, finally perching him on a nearby wall.

What was needed here was a laugh provoked by something going wrong. I figured out that it would be funnier if this second boy climbed on the tree over the smaller child so he could see everything better. Then when the tree was shaken the branch would break under the boy's weight, causing him to fall on Gable just as he was making his shot, and that's the way it worked out.

M-G-M also remade my old picture *The Cameraman* as *Watch The Birdie*, with Red in my part. But the great scene in the bath-house got nothing like the laughs our version had. I believe this was because they made a mistake I had avoided. This was using Mike Mazurski, the huge ex-wrestler, as the other man in that undressing scene. In my opinion, the audience just did not believe that Mazurski would not have thrown Red Skelton out the moment he got annoyed enough. I think that M-G-M made another error in that picture in having Red Skelton sneezing repeatedly all over Mazurski which was a disgusting thing to watch.²⁴⁵

Perhaps the reason I worked so much more effectively with Red Skelton is because he is the contemporary comedian whose working methods are closest to what ours were in the silent days. The first Skelton movie I worked on was the one in which Esther Williams made her screen debut. The picture was called *Swimming Beauty* but without my consent. I suggested that a more effective box-office title would be *The Fatal Breast Stroke*, but Mr. Mayer was stuffy about it and said *Swimming Beauty* was as far as he cared to go in summoning up carnal images in our customers' lively imaginations. Another Esther Williams picture that I wanted to retitle was one in which she did a great deal of riding. I tried to get M-G-M to call that one *The Bride Wore Spurs*, but failed again to win over the brass.

"Let me take Skelton and work as a small company within Metro- do our stories, our gags, our production, our directing. Use your resources but do it our way- the way I did my best pictures. I'll guarantee you hits, I won't take a cent of salary until they have proved themselves at the box office." Buster to Mayer.

F. What sorts of things did you do for Red Skelton, when you worked with him?

²⁴⁵[Is it not interesting that Buster has an instinctive dislike of scatological humor where so many 'better educated' comedians use it constantly?]

He remade three pictures of mine at MGM. A picture called *The Cameraman*, and a picture called *Spite Marriage*, were the last two silents I made. Well, Skelton remade both of those. One was called *Watch The Birdie* (1951), and the other was called *I Dood It* (1943).

F. Were they successful, do you think?

They were for Skelton, yes.

F. Were they in the same class as your pictures?²⁴⁶

If you sat through the two pictures you wouldn't know it was the same story.

F. Is that because of the difference in personality between you two?

No! By the time the writers got through improving it, they killed half the laughs in it. Skelton had to dig up his own to put in there.

Projected W.W.2 sequel to '*Doughboys*'...

"We've got it. It's perfect, without any makeup, we've all aged."

Top Brass.. "You can't kid the war."

"Chaplin did it in 1918 with '*Shoulder Arms*'."

It might have just been an idea that he talked about with Blesh that didn't pan out, because they were all still around at that time, Sedgwick of course, he directed it and was in it. The other lead was Cliffy Edwards, and he had just done *Jiminy Cricket* for Disney, *Pinochio*, so he was around, they were the major leads in *Doughboys*, the three of them, and whoever the girl was probably was still around.

1943

FOREVER AND A DAY.

It was for British War Relief before we were in the war, and everybody in Hollywood was in it, worked free, or possibly the union made 'em pay scale. Buster's sequence was with Sir Cedric Hardwicke and they were plumbers installing the first bath-tub in this mansion, and the basic story was four generations of people living in the same house. They (Buster and Cedric) had a wonderful time, they did a lot of stuff that wasn't in because the picture got to be hours and hours too long, because there was all different directors for different sequences. But the one thing they had the most fun with was, it got to be tea time, four o'clock in the afternoon or whatever, so they get in the bathtub and sit down facing each other, and break out their lunch baskets, not only pouring their tea, but they made enormous thick onion sandwiches, and they're sitting there eating and crying, tears rolling down (Laughs) and Sir Cedric of course absolutely adored being able to do something silly like that, American films had never allowed him to do anything but villains and serious character parts, so they had a great time. I don't remember how long he was on it, but I know he had fun doing it.

I got the impression that Buster was quite popular with what they call the English Colony over here. Is this so?

Well, yeah, well actually you know Buster didn't have an enemy in the world to speak of. Everybody liked him, but being as unsocial as he was, it wasn't like he was visiting them in their homes or anything. But everybody always says... we'd go somewhere and whoever happened to be there'd say,

²⁴⁶[A certain source has quoted Buster thus:- '*Watch The Birdie*' was "not in the same class as my picture." I don't believe this curmudgeonly comment came from Buster, I believe the 'source' took it from this question.]

"Oh Buster, how are you." Always glad to see him, because we didn't go anywhere more than once a year or something, hardly ever went out. We used to stay home. But I don't remember being in any English peoples homes, or anybody else's for that matter.

<1944>

SAN DIEGO, I LOVE YOU,

He was a bus driver, and he had the same people back and forth to work, downtown to work in the morning, back out in the evening, and I guess they got sick and tired, they started talking about the boredom. So Buster took off and they went down the beach, just took them off on a nice long drive on their own. I don't remember the plot, except it was like a runaway bus full of people having a wonderful time. He had fun making it. He knew three quarters of the actors in it, Louise Allbright was the leading lady, and he was crazy about her, he thought she was wonderful. So many of them all at close quarters in the bus for days and days, they all got to know each other. I've not seen it since its original release, that's why I don't remember much about it, except that that's the way it started, with him taking his passengers off on a joyride.

NEW MOON.²⁴⁷

He and Nat Pendleton were the comedy leads in that picture, anyway they were the comedy interest and the picture just got so long and so out of hand with all the musical numbers they had to do, and all the added scenes that they would put into a movie that wouldn't have been on the stage, the thing got to be like three and a half hours long or something. So they just went in and cut out every comedy sequence, which didn't hurt the plot a bit, cut it all out, and the only time you see them is when they're marching down a road, and Nelson Eddie's singing one of his robust songs, y'know,

"March-march-march-a-boys-a-marchin.." that kind of thing, and they're stomping along behind him, and they're just not quite even in focus, so the only reason you can tell it's them is because you know it is. And that's the only time they appear in the movie. It had nothing to do with the fact that it wasn't funny or anything like that, the movie got away from them and they made too much movie. He was crazy about her, Jeanette MacDonald,

The Iron Butterfly?!

They got along really well. They'd sit and talk by the hour. I have no idea why, they just admired each other. Of course, she came from Broadway, musical comedy, he'd probably seen her do shows in New York before film. She was very talented. Of course, Mother Eddie's another story, he was gay, so there was not that much rapport. A closet gay he was. It didn't show that much, he kept it pretty well covered up.

Was Buster not keen on homosexuals?

Oh, he didn't care one way or another, but it's just they had no common interests, they just never had anything to sit and put their feet up and talk about like he could with her. It's fun to watch those old dead movies (Laughs) because the love scenes between Nelson Eddie (laughs), these love scenes where they

²⁴⁷[Harry Medved with Randy Dreyfuss. The 50 Worst Films Of All Time.: 'The film's appeal is slanted toward aging matrons in love with Nelson Eddy, who don't mind the interminable dialogue, ridiculous plot, and heavy-handed moralising...Pre-production publicity reported that comic genius Buster Keaton would make a guest appearance, but someone must have wised up the Great Stone Face, as he is nowhere to be seen in the finished product.']

might be holding each other and singing, and they're holding each other like this, [demonstrates] ah dear, it's funny.

Yes, I've always felt that in some of these movies there must often have been much more amusement for the people that made them watching them, knowing what the public don't...

Yeah.

<1945>

THAT'S THE SPIRIT.

San Diego I Love You (1944) and That's The Spirit (1945) where he ran the complaint department in heaven. [Laughs] He wore a white suit and his own flat hat white, and his white desk was on a cloud. That's all he did in the film was the complaint department. Those were the Ernie Pagano and Mike Feschier movies, and of course Pagano was an old friend of Buster's, he had worked as a writer for Buster when he was a young kid, and at this point he is a producer at Universal. They were cute movies.

Was there any of Buster's input in the actual scripts?

Those two, probably yes, because Ernie Pagano would rely on him, he'd say, "Look, you're going to drive the bus and so forth, and these are your passengers, think about it." So Buster would think of things to do, and he'd talk to them, and they'd say "Good." or "No."

Feschier and Pagano were kind of wild characters, they had wonderful ideas.

THAT NIGHT WITH YOU.

I have no idea what that's about.

[A musical. Buster seen briefly as a short order cook.]

1946

'The front room [of Keaton's bungalow at MGM] is entirely consecrated to the mechanical arts.'

That was in the office, he and Ed Sedgwick shared an office in the writers building, outside the commissary, the main commissary door was eight feet from their office so everybody used to stop in, and they had two great big rooms, and Buster built all these erector set things in the front room of the office. Everybody that wanted to hide and not work would come in and sit around in the office.(laughs) The censorship man, from the Hays office, he worked, and when there wasn't anything for him to do he spent half his time hanging out in the office, he was a real nice guy.²⁴⁸ Mayer's nephew, Jack Cummings, I just saw him recently and he's a gorgeous gray-haired old man now, he was quite young then, any way, he came flying in one day, an uncle by marriage had died, and he had to go to the funeral, and of course, when they're orthodox, if they die during the night or whatever, they have to be buried before sundown the next day, and he'd only heard about it after he'd gotten into work, and he had to get to this funeral, and he had a very expensive suit and good tie and everything on, so he came into Buster and said,

"Have you got a tie in the drawer for me?" because it was tradition they had to cut the tie off and put it in the casket, it didn't have to be a necktie, but it had to be a little personal thing that had to go in, Hollywood tradition just said necktie so, but he wasn't willing to cut up his good silk necktie to put in this uncles

²⁴⁸ [Possibly Robert Vogel, MGM Production Code Administrator.?)

casket that he didn't really know that well so he borrowed a necktie that Buster says,

"Here, this one only cost two or three dollars." and he gave it to him to wear to the funeral to cut up. But I mean, that's the kind of things that went on in that office, everybody in the studio called it The Boars Nest, and there was an enormous big blow-up picture of Lucille Ball on the wall, gorgeous picture of her, and it says

"To The Boars with love from The Madam, no I mean Madame." So that was their main decoration. It was a fun place.

Henriette Nizan: '....Impressive mechanical constructions are erected on huge tables. Buster loves inventing gadgets. It's his greatest pride. He himself insisted on doing me the honours of his great infernal nutcracking machine.

The machine which stands on a table must be at least three feet high. It looks extremely complicated. This is how it works: a crane, put in motion, picks up a choice nut from a gunny sack. The crane raises the nut to the top of a slide and drops it; the nut begins its slide, and after meandering from small a to big A, then from small b to big B, it drops into a basket. The basket conveys it from C in C' to a transporter bridge. From there, after a lot of comings and goings intended [ostensibly] to soften it, the nut crosses several canals and inclined planes, and then, suddenly set on its vertical, comes to a raised platform on which it descends, progressively, until it arrives at last beneath a kind of steam-hammer in the form of a mallet which, at the proper moment, rises, comes down, and....misses. There is nothing for it but to begin all over again.' ['Portrait de Buster Keaton', Le Magasin du Spectacle, No.4, August 1946.]

That's approximately right, except that if the nut was not cracked by this lead weight that came down, it was a mistake, because most of the time it actually did crack the nut and then another nut would start this whole progress. So obviously the time she was watching it didn't work right. But other than that it's quite right.

GOD'S COUNTRY.

It was just awful, a terrible, cheap color movie, when most of 'em weren't being made in color, but it's that awful, not technicolor, but a cheap home movie type color, and the color was just atrocious. And the picture wasn't any good either; except that we were up in Big Bear, which is up in the mountains with a beautiful lake and everything for about a week, and whatever the plot was, he was the cook for the camp in the film, and he cooked outdoors on a camp fire, and all these animals were there to help him. He starts out to make some recipe, and Jimmy the crow, a trained crow, while he's busy stirring, Jimmy's turning pages in the cookbook, so by the time he got through he had the worst mess in the whole world. Then there was a darling little baby bear about two feet high in the scene; later it died because everybody kept playing with it and feeding it all the wrong things.

He had a tame raccoon that was making the bread, they buried raisins and nuts and things in this bread dough and what the raccoon was trying to do was get them out, but it looked like he was kneading the dough for bread. He had two or three other creatures, I think there was a tame deer in the scene, but he had all these animals gathered around while he was cooking. That's all I remember him doing in that, but he probably did a lot more, that was the only part I liked.

Only a few years ago I had another chance to demonstrate the art of custard-pie throwing on Ed Wynn's TV program. I had been guest star several times on Ed's show, but this was an impromptu appearance. As everybody knows, Ed is a lifelong collector

of funny hats. One day I found one I thought he would like and brought it to the CBS Playhouse where he was broadcasting. I found him in his dressing room, being made up. After admiring the hat and thanking me for it, Ed asked,

"Where do you keep your stage wardrobe?"

"Home," I replied, "but why?"

"I have no finish for tonight's show. I thought if you come on you might think of something. How fast can you get home and change into your stage clothes and get back?" I told him,

"It will take me ten minutes to drive there, ten to drive back, and five minutes more to dig up the stage outfit and get into it."

Ed looked at his watch, saw he had thirty-three minutes before going on, and said, "You can just make it. That's if you hurry." He quickly explained that he had lined up four of the old Keystone Cops to demonstrate custard-pie throwing.

"Why I never thought of getting the champ," he added, "I'll never understand. Even now I don't know how to use the pie-throwing for the finish. But hurry - and try to think of a finish for me."

I raced home, hustled into my old outfit - pork-pie hat, slap shoes, and baggy pants, and was back in time. But not in time, of course, to write any dialog or to explain to the cameraman where I was going to move and what I was going to do next. And without that - a camera rehearsal - everybody, particularly in the control room, can get very confused on a TV show.

But there was no time to worry about that.

Everybody loved the finish I improvised - except Chester Conklin, Hank Mann, his brother Heinie, and Snub Pollard, the four Keystone Cops involved. They had been looking forward to throwing the custard pies and did not like my taking over the job. They had to be sweet-talked into accepting the change I had dreamed up.

As many TV fans will recall, Ed Wynn always ended his show by coming out in nightgown and nightcap, carrying a candle, and getting into bed.

This night I followed him on, sat on the side of his bed, and warned him, "Now, Ed, if you're going in for this style of comedy and getting mixed up with characters like Keystone Cops, you've got to learn to throw pies. I'm going to give you your first lesson tonight."

I went off stage, got Hank Mann, and stood him near the head of the bed. Then I got a pie from the stack on a tea table.

"Now, anyone can do this one." I explained to Ed Wynn, demonstrating as I talked.

"It is called the walking thrust. All you need to do is walk up to him and push it in his face. But before you start away, give it a slight twist. That's in the interests of efficiency. The slight turn makes the dough portion of the pie cling to the victim."

"Just a second," I said, "till I get a clean Cop."

When I had the next Keystone Cop lined up I continued my lecture to Wynn, saying, "Any time you have to throw one of these things from three to six feet you shot putt it - like this. But, my friend, the secret, when you have to throw the pie more than eight feet, is to have enough dough in the pie so it will remain perpendicular, that is, sail flat as it comes off your fingers."

With the third Cop ready, I continued my explanation with,

"However, if you wish to be more artistic, you use the renowned ancient Roman discus throw which is by far the most beautiful delivery of all." In demonstrating this I spun halfway around, turning the pie as I whirled, and let go hitting the Cop square in the face.

Now I paused for a moment, as though awed by the significance of the final contribution I was to make to Ed's education in slapstick.

"The last one, of course, is the most difficult." I told him. "And, Ed, it will take you years to learn to throw like this! For this one is the custard-pie throw that everyone misses with most often. It is really the same sort of overhand throw that the catcher makes to second base from behind the plate. As you can observe, Ed, you pull back your arm just as far as it will go, then bring the pie in all of the way from East st. Louis - and let 'er go!"

Traveling all the way across the stage as that custard pie did, you need luck to catch your target square. But luck was with me that night, the fourth and final Cop catching it right in the face.

"I got the finish I wanted." Ed Wynn whispered to me. "You saved the show for me tonight."

January 10, 1946. Joe Keaton dies at age 79

Joe was only, oh, I don't think he was that old. We didn't know in those days, but Joe had Alzheimers, but it didn't have a name then, and it all happened within like a year or less, very quick, because we had had to take him out of the hotel and put him in a board and care situation. The last time I went over to visit him it was summer and I had a white dress on, and he kept calling me nurse, he had ceased to recognize me. But it was a strange mental thing, he digressed, he went from, this is 1945 we'll say, he went back to the thirties, and he'd tell stories, and they were true, they were things that happened, and he went back and back. Before he finally died, he went back to where Buster was a baby. And he didn't recognise Buster either?

No. He lived inside his head by then. But the thing is, it wasn't rambling nonsense, it was real things but he just went back in time. It was quite fascinating. It would have been a wonderful history to have if you'd of had tape recorders in those days.

1947

EL MODERNO BARBA AZUL.

That was that Mexican thing. That's the first picture that Alex Salkind ever produced when he was a young kid, before he was ever married. Cuddles Salkind, everybody called him Cuddles. Now of course, his son is the big-shot producer of all the 'Batman' movies. He became very big. I think they lived in Italy. I don't remember how he winds up in Mexico, and how he gets conned into or forced into... I think they catch him and put him in jail and they force him to go to the moon in this rocket, 'cause he's a jailbird and nobody cares what happens to him, so they shoot him off in this rocket, and when he comes down he gets out and sniffs the air to see if it's good to breathe, and then tries jumping to see if he's going to bounce a lot, and he decides, you know, not too bad after all. And what happened was that the rocket went up and came right back down again about a mile from where he took off, he's nowhere near the moon. But anyway, it was a real cheap terrible movie, but we had fun. We were in Mexico City for eight weeks, had a good time.

I was playing Washington, in the stage show Three Men on a Horse. I said , "Eleanor, I've got something to show you."

We went to the Smithsonian, and there it was- the Gentleman's Hobbyhorse, our replica of the first bicycle ever made. There hadn't been one left in existence, so we built it from an old print.

Somebody from the Smithsonian saw it in Our Hospitality and wrote us asking for it. So we shipped it on.

"I can do a lot for him, (Eddie Cantor) I can relax him, show him how to go in front of a camera and not try to be funny every second. Not teach him anything new- only to act in a movie as he always did on the stage." Buster to Schenck.

'Fred Jacks': I'll have a check tomorrow and will square everything. "Don't do that yet, take care of the bills on my house as they come along, up to the amount you owe us. And keep both houses moving. I'm going to leave you a few thousand besides. We might get delayed down there, and we want to get this house finished. We'll settle all accounts when we get back."

He was a friend, he was a football player, his name was Jack Fredericks, and it was a piece of property that we were going to build on, and we had just started the house, it was like four acres, and all we'd done was plant a great big row of pine trees across the back, and we used to go out and soak 'em real good once a week, and we were just getting ready to start the house, we had cement foundations laid and everything , and we had to go to Europe [Medrano]. So we left, and we weren't allowed to send any money out of France, we had to leave half of it there. We could send half of it home, but we had to spend the other half of it there, and it was a lot of money, I think he was getting like thirty-five hundred a week, and how much can you spend in Paris? At the end of the war there wasn't anything to buy, but anyway, that's beside the point. So that's why we asked Jack, who was the manager of a radio station, if he would keep up the payments on that land, which wasn't very much at all, until we could get back and we would re-imburse him. He never made any payments and we lost it. As it happens he was very ill and he didn't know it, nor did we, he had a brain tumour, and finally they went in and they weren't able to do anything with it except they took a piece of skull out so it could grow and diminish the pain. And he went blind. So that's what his problem was, he wasn't an intentional villain, he was just incapacitated. We lost the property for lack of payment before we ever got back. I think it was the summer we did all the music halls in England and were gone for three or four months, because otherwise we wouldn't have been gone long enough for all of that to have happened. Anyway, that's the story behind that.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE.

Making any sort of movie is tense, nerve-wracking work.

1948>50. Circus.

First Cirque Medrano shows. (until 1954.)

They were fun, they were wonderful. It was the typical European one-ring circus, the top one in Paris. We did it, we were there three times. They were always wonderful fun. Buster always was next to closing in the second act. They'd have all the circus acts in the first half on heavy fibre cloth, whatever, like a heavy doormat, and then the second half was what they call the floorshow and they'd lay a hardwood floor down. They had dancers and juggling acts and all kinds of stuff that worked on the floor but no animals in the second part. The first year we were there, which was right after the war, food was still scarce and everything, in fact it was the opening of the circus after the war, it hadn't been running all through the war years. Food was hard to come by, they had that godawful ersatz bread that you'd swear had sawdust in it. Soap and paper, nothing was available, but with our passports, we were allowed to go to the american graves association, which was on the isle of Saint Germaine in the middle of the river, and we could go to the P.X. and buy anything we wanted. We couldn't get into the commissary, but it was a half door, and the bakers'd come over and say

"Buster!" and they'd give him two or three loaves of white bread which were impossible to get. Wally Beery was over there for a visit at the time, and he used to go with us. An american dance team, they were at the Lido, we had dinner with them almost every night because we had to eat early before the restaurants were really open so we could digest enough to go to work. Anyway, we'd all go over there, and Buster'd buy cases of hand soap and boxes of chocolate, crackers and jars of peanut butter and things like that to keep in our room, but he used to take the candy and the soap over to the Medrano and put 'em on the bar at the back, they used to serve drinks in the intermission, and he'd put them there and all the clowns, everybody would take what they want. Well, there was one Italian mother with three teenage kids who were wonderful dancers, they did tap-dancing and acrobatics and everything, there was a boy and two girls, 15, 16, 17, and she literally stood there and cried at the soap, because they were rationed one square piece that would be like a half a pound of this horrible lye soap that would take your skin off, and they had that for all of them for a month to wash themselves, their clothes, everything; and when they got these bars of soap she just stood there and cried. That's how much they needed everything that first year. We went over once a week and bring all this stuff back to them. We'd use the bread, and our little room waiter would keep it in the kitchen, and he'd slice off two slices for me and two slices for Buster for breakfast every morning, and then at the end of the week when we'd come back with a fresh loaf or two from the P.X. then he says

"Okay, you can have the rest now." So he would get the end of a loaf every week, he was probably like eighteen nineteen years old probably hadn't had a decent slice of bread since he could remember as a small child. It was really pathetic in a way.

Of course, all this wouldn't surprise a European for a minute.

Buster did the duel from Spite Marriage with the ring-master and the clowns and everybody, and he embellished it and made it quite a bit longer, and it was a big success. Then the next time we went back he did the new years eve sketch

where he put me to bed. We come home and I'm tipsy and go to sleep on the floor, and then the other one was a bunch of opening sketches before the credits of his television show. They'd start the show and he'd come out and do a little pantomime thing, and then they would go to the opening credits and the commercial, then they'd get into the real part of the show. So he took about six or eight of these things, strung them all together because they all had to do with him versus a policeman. So, they were each different, and I did one part of that thing in it, with the telephone booth, and then one of the other clowns did the shell game thing. He started out by picking a flower to put in his buttonhole, the cop comes so he tries to put it down and bury it real quick, and of course he keeps getting hauled off to jail, every little sketch he gets hauled off to jail. He created a couple of extra pieces to add to that to make it long. That was the third year probably, I don't know.

Were you surprised when you got there to find Buster treated so differently from the way he was treated in America?

I wasn't as surprised as he was, because over here I really didn't know the difference that much, go to work every morning to the studio.. we were never out and around in public or making personal appearances in theaters or anything like that enough for me to know one way or another, but when we got to Europe he was Big, Big, Big.²⁴⁹ But with the American public being so blase and they forget everything within twenty minutes, it shocked him more at how popular he still was over there, more than it did me. He felt wonderful about it. People would line up for autographs, it startled him.

I found another great thrill in appearing in person before a European audience. Many of those who came to see me seemed to remember my pictures fondly. I did a duelling sketch which I had originally performed in *The Passionate Plumber*.

I don't know whether it was the first year or not, but we had the animal acts, the Knie Circus was a Swiss circus that operated under tent all summer everywhere, but by the time *Cirque Medrano* opened which was practically the end of September, for the winter because it was indoors, these other circuses were closed. There was three horse acts, a thorobred liberty act, beautiful chestnuts worked in liberty with the plumes.... anyway, we had three sizes of horses, the Shetland ponies, the Liberty horses and Buster used to call them his big showgirls, they were the big, big dappled grey Percherons that were so beautiful, they were there and they worked in an animal act too. Buster used to steal all the sugar cubes he could get his hands on and fill his pockets up and then he'd buy chestnuts, and take them in and all he did was open the stable door, and you never heard such a racket in your life, with the feet (Stamps) and whinnying and braying, they all knew him the minute he came through the door they were going to get a treat. He used to go down the line, there was about 25 or 26 of them with all three sizes, and he had to hand feed every one of them all the way down the line, every night.

There was a dog act, whippets, that raced, and they did the liberty horse act that the horses always did, but it was these whippet dogs, and for a finale the one dog would come out with this little Gibraltar ape on his back, and race around the ring and do a couple of tricks. That monkey fell madly in love with Buster, and I wasn't allowed near him. She bit me black and blue on my arm two or three times when I got close enough to touch Buster, I wasn't allowed. Oh, she hated me. She was absolutely mad about him. We'd come in to go to work, we used to

²⁴⁹[The capital B's are favouritism on my part.]

get there during intermission, because we had another 45 minutes before we went on, and the dog act had just finished, they closed the first half. So the owner would just hang out a little bit till we got there, and we'd come through the stage door and he'd let the monkey go and she would come across there and jump and run up and hang around his neck, and we'd keep her in the dressing room until we were ready to go on, and we'd go back down and give her back to her owner.

I suppose by this time you were fairly used to animals clamping themselves to Buster?

Yeah.

That was a period of like ten years between the three. We weren't there every year.

Walter Kerr: 'Struggling to get a drunken girl into bed... he made the business more vigorously funny than it had been when he first used it in the film 'Spite Marriage'. I went backstage to chat with him afterward and had rather a long wait. The man who came from the shower was in a state close to physical exhaustion; his wife pummeled him, toweled him back into condition as a fighter's trainer might.'

I don't remember ever doing that. We used to change and go out for dinner, because you wouldn't eat much before so we'd always have to go have a snack after.

1948

Un Duel a Mort. Films Azur. (French short subject.)

They just filmed what he did at The Cirque Medrano. They probably did it in a couple of hours because if they used the cast, the only time that it took was to set up the lighting and the cameras.

In 1948 Jack Cummings, one of the great M-G-M directors, called me in to look at Red Skelton's *The Southern Yankee*, which had received disappointing receptions when previewed. This is, of course, a situation which makes a man feel like the marines coming to the rescue.

I told Cummings he had a whale of a story but, in my opinion, they had made a couple of mistakes. One was having Red behave like an imbecile in the opening scenes. As the comedian and leading man, Red lost the audience's sympathy by behaving too stupidly. If you act as screwy as he was doing, the people out front would not care what happened to the character you were playing. They reshot those scenes, toning down Red's nutty behaviour and also eliminating some of the noise that marred the opening scene.

I also contributed the gag in which Red was shown walking between the Union Army and the Confederate Army, with both armies cheering madly. The reason was that Red was wearing half of a Union army hat and uniform on the side facing the Northern soldiers and a Southern uniform on the other. In addition he had sewed together the flags of the two opposing sides so that the boys in blue saw a Union flag and the Southerners only the flag of the Confederacy.

Both sides cheer him wildly until a sudden gust of wind reverses the flag, showing both sides the game he is playing. As Red turns around to straighten the flag they discover his half-and-half uniform.

During the nine or ten years I worked as a gagman at M-G-M I discovered, among other things, how little faith some of the industry's most-respected directors and producers had in their own judgement.

One director who had brought in many fabulous successes cancelled one of the 'Thin Man' series, which he had been all ready to shoot, after he got my opinion of the story.

"This is a very amusing script," I told him, "but you have one tricky problem. That is keeping your audience interested in your leading lady. This is because you show her as so frivolous and screwloose that you will lose all sympathy for her."

That was all I said. It should not have been too difficult for this gifted director and a crack M-G-M screen writer to rewrite this character. Instead he completely lost faith in the story, ordered it taken off the schedule, and had an entirely different story written for the Thin Man series.

The original director of the Thin Man series was Woody Van Dyke.

Did Buster know him?

Oh yeah. Everybody knew everybody on the lot, and everybody always cried "Help!" to Buster when they needed help.

Some time later I had another revealing experience with another experienced director at Twentieth Century-Fox. That studio had borrowed me to help work on the W.C.Fields sequence in Tales of Manhattan. As this old director slipped me the script of the picture he was shooting, he whispered,

"Take this home and read it, but don't let anyone see you walking out with it under your arm." I was able to give him some advice next day that he accepted and used in the picture, but the studio never knew he had let me read the script.

That's Mal St Clair.

And it wasn't that he wanted all of the credit for himself. He was afraid that if news got around that he required an outside opinion from an old friend it would injure his reputation.

Making any sort of movie is tense, nerve-wracking work. This was particularly true in a big studio like M-G-M which was so bedeviled by office politics and conflicts for power on all of its higher levels. One of the top directors there once asked me to read the script of a film he was shooting. When I suggested that in one scene he move the camera to avoid having a shadow fall across, he shouted in a rage, "Damn it! Don't tell me where to put my cameras."

I shut up and let him make the scene his own way. I mention it here only as another instance of cracking nerves in the higher ranks of the movie world.

Though TV revived my career as an actor, I take no satisfaction in the way so many of these men were driven into involuntary retirement by the coming of the same medium. Each of them, at his peak, produced fine entertainment.

1949

Walter Kerr: 'I travelled to Hoboken, New Jersey in 1949 when he was appearing in a show, his stock company of Three Men On A Horse.... There he was, idly sauntering into an onstage bar to casually throw one leg over it, forgetfully throw the other over it a minute or two later, and of course take a thumping five foot fall onto his back..' Well, for a start, Buster's legs ain't five foot long...

It was a little cocktail table, not a bar. He did it.

At one time when we were in Palm Springs, late at night and the place was three-quarters empty, the dining room was closed, and Buster and I wandered into the dining room, I don't know why, bored, getting ready to leave or something and out of the corner of his eye he saw Charlie Butterworth, funny little character actor, saw him up in the doorway, so Buster did the thing; he picked up his foot, put it on the table, reached down, got the other one, put it on the table, and when he did it just right, got the balance just right he actually almost stayed suspended for a second before he dropped. And he did it for Charlie. And he got up and dusted himself off, and Charlie says,

"You know, I think if the wind was with you, you could do it." And he turned round and walked away. I don't think he ever knew Buster saw him even. But it was just one of those silly moments. Buster probably was doing it for me actually. He did that on television three or four times, with Billy Gilbert, Ed Wynn. And he did it in the molasses sketch.

[Dardis.] In a talk with his agent Ben Pearson about TV, Harold Lloyd observed, "It's Buster Keaton that ought to be on television- all those sight gags!" Pearson agreed and asked Lloyd how to contact Buster. Lloyd advised him to begin by contacting Clyde Bruckman who told Pearson He and Buster could easily put together a presentation and promised to send Buster over next day. When Buster arrived he had almost nothing to say, except that he "Needed \$250 for next week's expenses." Pearson saw no difficulties.

First of all I never, ever heard anything about Harold Lloyd being involved in any way. I'm sure that Harold Lloyd had nothing whatever to do with talking to Ben Pearson about Buster going on to television. I never heard of that in my life. That's number one. Number two, Buster was working all the time, he didn't need two hundred and fifty dollars. He was still on salary at MGM at that time, and so was I. I was still working there because musicals didn't taper off until television started to become a threat, and it wasn't a threat for a couple or three years, that was like the middle fifties, before they suddenly realised it wasn't going to go away and they'd better start saving their pennies at the studios.

Buster got to be Ben Pearson's client through his old agent that he'd had many many years, Morrison. He was ready to retire, and he knew absolutely nothing, or wanted to know, about television coming in. And Ben Pearson had been a radio agent for years and all the same producer director, owner brass types went to TV from radio, so he was connected with all of those people and knew them, and Leo Morrison said,

"I'm going to give you to Ben Pearson to handle, because he knows what he's doing and I don't, and I want to retire and get out of the business anyway." So that's how Buster went to Ben Pearson. And Ben Pearson knew all these radio people that were getting into TV and that's how the TV show happened.

So it was one of the thrills of my life when I got a chance in December of 1949 to do my own weekly TV show on KHJ, the Los Angeles Times broadcasting station.

By then I had almost given up hope of getting another real chance as an actor. I emphasize the word almost, because no one with actor's blood in his veins ever really admits to himself he is through, no matter what he says to other people. No, I did not really believe it in my heart, even after so many years of little success, no home runs, and plenty of errors.

That could have been him, he talked in baseball terms a lot. It was his favorite game that he played and watched.

Talking pictures killed our knack of comedy. But on TV I return to the silent technique. I deliberately do routines with no dialog. No dialog is a great relief to an audience.

The Buster Keaton Show was a success, but only on the West Coast where it gradually worked its way up to the position of Number One Comedy Program. In those days the only way to sell a Hollywood show to a national network was with Kinetoscopes, and these were dismal things to look at in 1949. And my show was never sold to a sponsor as a coast-to-coast attraction. I think the story would have

been different if I had waited for just two more years. But I had never, of course, wanted less to wait for anything. It was a lot of work, but it was a lot of fun.

TV had brought me back as an actor. By 1949, except for an occasional days work- which seemed to be getting more occasional all of the time- I had not put on grease paint for the cameras in almost five years. The summer theaters had put in no bids for my services since 1941 when I toured in *The Gorilla*. My most important engagement had been a four-week date as star of a famous Paris circus, back in 1947.

James Agee's essay 'Comedy's Greatest Era.' published in LIFE, excerpt... 'Perhaps because 'dry' comedy is so much more rare and odd than 'dry' wit, there are many who never cared much for Keaton. Those who do cannot care mildly...' Did it change his life in any way, this essay?

No. He loved that one and the Walter Kerr, the love letter, he thought they were both.. particularly since they were in such prominent magazines. They were real magazines, not fan magazines where they make up stuff, you know.²⁵⁰

Life magazine: 'One undisputed advantage the citizens of California have over their countrymen is being able to see Buster Keaton on TV. Televised out of Los Angeles, Keaton is reviving the dead-pan pantomime that made him one of the greatest of the silent movie comics. Keaton has not been starred in a movie since 1933, but now at the age of 54 he is taking pratfalls on a bare floor that other comics wouldn't try on a pile of marshmallows. Like Ed Wynn, who first introduced Keaton as a guest star on his own show in December, Keaton is enthusiastic about TV. He feels that it captures some of the movies' early gusto and is just right for spontaneous clowning.' Any comments?

No, except he was doing all the work himself, Hal Goodwin was with him and so was Clyde Bruckman, and the three of them for almost no money, I mean there was no budget to speak of, were trying to write and direct and create and put on the screen, it was a half hour show and each segment, you gotta have twelve and a half minutes, and twelve and a half minutes, with commercials in between. He did seventeen weeks of those live television, and they finally just gave up and said,

"No more."

Couldn't do it. So that was in late forty-nine and then early fifty he started up again, he did thirteen more on film.

When they started on the second series I found out they were going to do it with just a motion picture camera without an audience; and for some reason this just cannot be done with this type of picture. I wouldn't re-sign again. To commence with I knew what I was up against trying to make that weekly show and dig up new material. Well, it just can't be done, you can't dig it up that fast. It isn't a case of how many writers you can hire. So I was contented to do nothing but guest shots from then on. Television meant that live audience.

Sounds like, 'The live audience made television,' was the way it should have read. The live audience made television possible and pleasurable for him to do.

And without it he wasn't interested?

Yeah. He did other things later, like he did the Man Who Came To Dinner, and different Broadway shows for television, but they were regular book shows without an audience, that's a different story. Comedy sketch work is no good without an audience.

²⁵⁰[I presume the Walter Kerr love letter is the same article printed in Mr. Kerr's book, 'The Silent Clowns.' Strangely enough, even though it is full of inaccurate observation, errors of fact, and flights of fancy, it is still one of my favorite articles by a male critic, being both affectionate and insightful, and recommended to any reader who already knows the facts.]

I worked with him in the TV shows. The TV show was January of 1950. Television didn't start in Los Angeles until December of '49, and Buster's show started a month later.

What did it feel like working with Buster after being a dancer all those years?

Well, it was no problem, any female that worked with him was just a breathing prop. Just like all other so-called leading ladies of his, I was just one more prop to be handled, and thrown around, and dumped on my head or whatever happened to be called for. You have to have a certain amount of timing, when to turn, when to do this, and they were all pantomime sketches, he never talked, so that was no problem, nobody learned any words, we just worked. He was very precise, very mathematical in his work, and I had to be the same.

The important thing, though, was how these appearances on local television shows steamed up the interest of producers in other fields. I did about twenty-three Buster Keaton TV shows in 1950 and seventeen more in 1951. The same day I turned in the final 1951 show Eleanor and I left for Paris to play a return engagement at the Paris circus. The date was so successful that I was booked for another four-week engagement during the following year.

European circuses do not play under canvas but in arenas which are more like vast theaters in the round than anything else. You perform in the center of the arena which you approach through the same wide passages used by the elephants and other animals. In 1947, two years after the war ended in Europe, there had been no German acrobats, clowns, jugglers, or trapeze performers in the show as the feeling in the French capital was still too bitter against the recent enemy. But the Germans were back in Paris by 1950.

Medrano: "The circus, like I imagine it, an American circus, a big tent with five or ten thousand people in it, it was very scary, the thought of that. He was scared. But when he saw the place he changed his mind, because my place was very small, fifteen hundred people."

"The clowns in the show used to gather in the entrance way, in the shadows, watching him each night." Uncredited clown.

"Oh yes, he directed, he was quiet doing it, rather than talk he'd come and get hold of you and put you where he wanted you. [Demonstrates] It was all pantomime, get hold of you kind of thing, and move me round, tell me where to walk, where to stand, which shoulder to stand behind." Uncredited Clown.

"Myself and the other clowns were amazed, that's about the only thing that I can say." Uncredited Clown.

My salary was \$3,500 a week. However, a French law that we ran into stopped foreigners from taking more than half of their earnings out of the country. This restriction gave Eleanor and me the excuse to live like regal personages at the George V Hotel- without even feeling extravagant.

THE LUVABLE CHEAT.

rel. 5/11/49. 'A classic Balzac story of an inveterate gambler who keeps stalling creditors with charmingly inventive tales. Keaton has a bit role.'

That was Charlie Ruggles I believe, it was a French farce that they tried to remake in English, it didn't come off, it wasn't funny. Except that from the very moment the thing started, when he got involved, he knew two or three people, he

and Charlie Ruggles were good friends, so they had a good time regardless, but they knew it wasn't going to be any good. French farce does not translate to Hollywood motion picture studios, it just doesn't work.

I've seen it work occasionally on TV..

..because on TV, especially if you're working live to an audience, you continue to go, go, go, and you pace it and get some timing down so that it.. you know, you get your timing... when you're making pictures and do a scene, and you sit down, and you do a scene, and you go to your dressing room, there's never any timing or pace, and farce doesn't work that well that way.

IN THE GOOD OLD SUMMERTIME.

That originated for Buster... they were about ready to shoot, and it was Van Johnson and Judy Garland, and S. Z. Sakall, who was a character man, and they were about ready to go and in the background was a music store, it was a gay nineties type background, and Zakolt had this very valuable violin that he loved dearly and that he played all the time, and Bob Leonard, the director, brought Buster the script and says,

"I've gotta break this violin, and it's got to be an accident, it can't be deliberate, and I don't know how to do it, will you read the thing and tell me how to do this thing." So Buster took the script home and read it that night and went back to Bob the next day, and he says,

"Well, if you do thus, and so, and this and that and the other, it'll work." Bob says,

"I only know one real way that's gonna work, and be right, is if you do it." So he says,

"Go 'way, I'll figure something out." So a few days later, he'd given the script back to the writers, and they had written Buster in to the entire movie, so that he could break the violin at the end. He was an employee in the music store that had this mad crush on Judy, of course, she was quite happy, she never knew he was there, but in order to make him young enough to make that plausible, they put lifts on, took about 15, 20 years off of him with the lifts and a blonde wig.. to hide all that... and he did look a lot younger, Van was in his early thirties by then, so it wasn't totally ridiculous. That was one of Judy's bad periods, when she wasn't showing up. I think they originally scripted it for ten days, he was on the film for six weeks, that was just waiting around for Judy. As it turned out it worked fine, the picture was a success, he broke the violin successfully. He was in it all the way through, actually they never wrote him in to any extent, he was just there, he'd be in the background, or have one line here or there, they just wanted to establish him all through the movie, because this was like a party for some reason, at the end, and they didn't want a stranger stepping in to break the violin, they wanted it to be logical that he was there at the party, and I'm not sure that he wasn't dancing with Judy when he broke the violin. The violin was laying on the edge of the bandstand because naturally, Zakolt was going to play, there was no way you could stop him from playing, and that's how the violin got involved laying out in the open easily to be broken.

Why did they need the violin to be broken in the first place?

Possibly because he made a nuisance of himself all through the movie playing it every chance he got and nobody enjoyed it, I don't know, I don't remember.

How did Buster feel about the lifts?

It might have been a little uncomfortable but it wasn't painful. He didn't care except that if it had got to be painful he would have cared, but I never heard him squawk about it.

YOU'RE MY EVERYTHING.

I have no idea in the world what that was, anything about it, except that Buster absolutely adored Anne Baxter, he thought she was wonderful. They got along very well. He said she was a darling wonderful girl. I don't know what it was about, I can't remember seeing the movie..

1950

September. Last Gag written for MGM

Richard Avedon did a whole layout for Harpers Bazaar with Buster and Audrey Hepburn, a lovely gal, and Mel Ferrar, her husband at the time, and the three of them did a whole fashion layout all over Paris.

For my return engagement [at Cirque Medrano] in 1950 I used a sketch from my last silent picture, *Spite Marriage*, doing it with Eleanor. Previously she had done no acting, had worked only as a dancer. But she did so well in those first appearances that I have never needed another woman partner.

The sketch is the one I have done many times since on TV. Also in my appearances with summer-stock companies as Erwin, the mystical-minded horse handicapper, in *Three Men on a Horse*.

The sketch shows us coming home on our wedding night, a little drunk but far more exhausted from fatigue. Eleanor collapses and falls on the floor. The rest of the sketch concerns my efforts to put her in bed. Eleanor weighs 110 pounds, and she has never put on an extra ounce. I thank heaven for that because that act, which runs between sixteen and seventeen minutes, requires me to stumble about carrying her in my arms. We also did this sketch for twelve weeks that year in Italian theaters.

In 1951 I did a less strenuous sketch called 'A Park Bench.' But what developed during the engagement was far more strenuous in its way than anything we had been through in quite a while.

While we were on the high seas my agent's European representative, without informing me, had booked me for a two-week engagement at the Cirque Royale in Brussels. This was to follow immediately after the Paris booking. The salary was \$600 less than I was getting from the French Showman.

In European circus circles they have not as yet heard about Macy's not telling Gimbels.²⁵¹ In any event, when the French showman learned about the Brussels engagement at less money he hit the roof. He seemed to think I was robbing him by letting him pay our round-trip expenses from Hollywood and then working for less money for a circus that had contributed nothing to our expenses.

What it was actually, the money might have had something to do with it but what it was, the original contract with Medrano was for one month and a month option. That was the third time we'd worked there, and he had never picked up the option, and Buster's agent without even thinking or knowing anything about

²⁵¹["Does Macy's tell Gimbel's?" is an old New York saying, used as an explanation for why something is being kept secret. K.H. Macy's and Gimbel's are two competing New York Department Stores.]

it booked him into the Cirque Royale in that second month. When Medrano found out about it he says,

"I have the option, you cannot have him. Because I have the option to keep him here another month if I want to." of course, he never had, and had no intentions of doing it. But I think for a finish, he cut Buster's money I think, I think he sued, or wanted to sue the, or was going to sue the Cirque Royale in Brussels for stealing Buster. I don't know, it was a whole drama, it was terrible.

He suggested I get off the hook by reducing my salary to the Brussels figure. When I refused, he offered to book me for two weeks more on the condition that I cancel the Belgian engagement. This, of course, I could not conscientiously do, and monsieur's next move was to go to the police.

When we returned to our hotel that night we found the gendarmes in our suite. they were itemizing everything we owned, down to and including the toothbrushes and Eleanor's hair net.

I appealed to the American consul for help. He recommended the services of a White Russian woman attorney. She spoke four languages and may have talked to our French boss in all four but could not convince him that he should release our personal belongings. The fiasco ended only when I agreed to reduce my Paris salary to the Brussels figure.

The thing was it was not our fault at all, it was Buster's agents fault, and he's sitting in Hollywood where nobody can touch him or reach him, or talk to him. But it does seem surprisingly strange ill-will from somebody who has already run a circus with Buster twice before?

Oh yeah, well, Medrano was a bastard, he always was, but since Buster made money for him every time we were there...he drew more people than anybody else possibly could. He always used us to open the season which gave him momentum for the rest of the year, because they were always closed during the summer.

What sort of bastard are we talking about here?

Businesswise, he was pure business, we never saw him for a cup of coffee or anything other than business, but, he was in it to make money. Everything's all sweetness and light now, Kevin or David or maybe even Linda the research person on Hard Act To Follow, went down to the south of France and saw Medrano and talked to him, he's retired and lives there, and everything is sweetness and light all was forgotten, he didn't remember any problems at all.

The incident brought me world-wide publicity. I imagine many persons said, 'Poor old Buster Keaton! After being such a great star he is down to playing in European circuses.'

But they were a little too late with their sympathy. I was enjoying my best-paid year since Louis B. Mayer fired me from M-G-M. While we were in Brussels, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., came over to hire me to play a straight dramatic role in one of the TV shows he films in London. I was paid \$1,500 for my five days work on it.

F. Have you ever had a desire to play something as straight as Shakespeare, or Moliere?

Shakespeare I don't want to play, no. I've never wanted to do Hamlet. But I have done dramatic parts.

F. What about those dramatic parts?

Oh, people get an idea, like Doug Fairbanks Jr. did. [9/May/54.] I went to London and did one of his shows. It was for television there. And it was a straight dramatic part. No laughs in it; not even a giggle in it.

Why did Keaton, a slapstick comedian, get chosen for this serious role?

The novelty of it, I guess.
That was great. That was the, it was an original short story. It was quite famous. There were two other main characters besides Buster, he lived in a boarding house, a rooming house, and the woman character was a great actress, she was a, I think a Russian actress that had gotten away from Russia, blonde character woman, wonderful actress, and then the other one was an English character comedian who I saw many times in film after, Jack Hawkins or something like that, anyway they were the three major characters, and I don't remember too much about the story except the featured thing in the story was his coat. It wasn't Gogol's 'The Overcoat' was it?

Yes.

How amazing. Was Buster the man in the coat?

Yes. And I know it came out quite well, it looked good, the only time I ever saw it was when it was on television here six or eight months later, because they ran the whole Doug Fairbanks Junior series here, and we saw it then. It was a half hour, and over so quick that I don't remember that much about it.

Absolutely straight dramatic role?

Oh yes.

To me it seemed Buster was an absolute natural for straight dramatic roles and this is the only time anyone ever used him for one.

Probably Junior thought that, he's been around long enough to know that most comics are good dramatic actors.²⁵²

We toured the English and Scottish provinces after that in the sketch in which I put Eleanor to bed.

Music Hall tour. BUSTER KEATON. HETTY KING. SHAUN GLENVILLE. ALBERT WHELAN. PETER BERNARD. GEORGE ROBEY. ARCHIE GLEN. MORAN & ELOF. 8 EMPIRE GIRLS. Poster.

[Eleanor reading from a presentation cigarette box:] 'George Durante. Jack Edge. Dolly Harmer, George Robey, Albert Whelan, Georgie Wood, Maurice Edmunds and Larry Gordon, Girls, George Saker, William Marsh of the Bernard Delfont office, it was the Moss Empire Theatres. July and August of 1951. To our American colleague Buster Keaton hoping he will never forget 'Do You Remember', (that was the name of the show, because everyone in there was old vaudevillians, Buster had worked with Albert Whelan, Hetty King, with Wee Georgie Woods and the gal that played his mother, he'd worked with them in the States when he was a kid in vaudeville.)

One of the great things that happened, it scared the daylights out of Buster (laughs), we got to Leeds and they had just laid a new floor on the stage, and of course all those old theaters were built on a rake. They had just put a new hardwood floor down and we were going to be the first ones to step on it. And we carried three little washable throw rugs that you could throw right in the washing machine, one on each side of the bed and one at the foot of the bed, because I laid around on the floor awhile and some of those floors were like ice, they were so cold. At one point I'm on the floor, he lays down beside me, reaches over, gets a hold of my arm, rolls over, gets me on his back, stands up, and I'm hanging like fireman style over his back. The whole idea is for him to get my

²⁵²[A copy of this show would have to be the Buster recorded performance collectable to beat all.]

dress off so he can get me into bed, and I had a hidden zipper that he couldn't find, he could never find it, the audience couldn't see it. So he starts around the end of the bed to get me on the right, he'd finally accomplished getting me on the bed, and he says thank heaven I did that, and he looks and my head is hanging off the foot of the bed. Now he's got to start over so I can get my head up on the pillow. So he picks me up again, starts around the bed again, and opening night in Leeds he steps on our little carpet, and it went. It just shot like a cannon, slipped on this new slippery floor, he went down, I went down, and I crashed fairly hard, and I opened my eyes, and it's pitch black and I think, 'Well, maybe I'm knocked out, but I don't feel knocked out.' I can't figure out what is going on. Now he's slid, carpet and all, clear down into the footlights. The audience is hysterical, funniest thing they ever saw. He gets up, brings the rug back, puts the rug back, he can't find me. And finally he looks down and the tip of one of my toes was sticking out under the bedspread. I'd shot right under the bed. So he reaches down and gets a hold and pulls me out by one leg, and brings me back out, picks me up and we finished the whole thing (laughs). And in the meantime he's saying,

"Are you all right?" I said,

"Yes, I'm fine." That was the wildest thing I ever saw, I mean I didn't see, but it must have been hysterical. The audience thought we should do it every show. We never could do it again. Somebody would have been killed or... it was just pure accident that I went under the bed out of sight, you really couldn't plan it.

One of those things that if it had been on film it would have stayed in the film.

Yes.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX.

...the year's No.1 guest star.

1950>53. Sunset Boulevard. Cats. Birds.

On coming home I became, I think, the year's No.1 guest star. I appeared on three Ed Sullivan shows in a row, five Ed Wynn shows, three Arthur Murray shows. Conrad Nagel and Faye Emerson, who had their own shows then, were others who used me as a guest star. That was the year we were kept in New York for four months just doing guest shots. I averaged two shows a week, with the lowest pay \$750 a shot (When rehearsal was necessary) and \$2,000 per Sunday from Sullivan.

Anything you'd like to say about these TV performances?

Nothing, except he was going crazy trying to write all these things all by himself and get it organized. They're sketches, one or two he repeated but mostly he's trying to work out sketches to do on these shows. There might have been a couple of interview things but mostly it was sketch work on the show. And he had to do everything by himself, work with the prop man to get all the props ready, everything. So by the time we got down to December he was a basket case. We finally left New York and got home christmas eve. He was exhausted. With good reason.

Summer theater owners also got into the pleasant custom of booking me in for star appearances in three old Broadway successes: The Gorilla, Merton of the Movies, and Three Men on a Horse.

Those were Summer Stock. You start in May, about memorial day, and you work a different town each week all summer with a show. You get four or five people in a cast, and they all travel with you and you work all summer long, mostly it's in the East, there's not much out here, because distances are too far apart out here. You wind up closing after Labor Day, in the first or second week of September. So that is summer stock. So you pick out a play, you rehearse it with your little four or five member cast, and then you fill in with apprentices and other actors in each town, to play the small parts. We did that three years, and that is really fun, because they're all small towns, people in the towns pay no attention to you, you just go about your business, they don't bother you. And you live in boarding houses and get wonderful food.

It seems strange that he has to do plays, in America..

Why not? He loved it.

But surely there's more money and kudos doing a Buster Keaton show as it were..

Well, two of those I think were before television, and he wasn't doing that much film. The Gorilla was very early, it was the first year we were married, and the only reason we didn't continue doing it, because it was fun, we could have gone every summer, it's like going on a picnic, make money having fun, but that was before Pearl Harbor happened and everything came to a screaming halt in a way, so that's the main reason we didn't do any of that any more, until much later. 1957 I think was the last time, that was Merton of the Movies. And after we played that all summer we bought it here to L.A. to the Huntington Hartford Theater over on Vine Street and played an additional six or eight weeks, and we brought the five principal characters in for that.

The Gorilla was a silly farce, it was two comedy detectives, there was a young man who was a juvenile detective, I think it was supposed to be England as I remember. But there was a gorilla loose in the house, and it had a whole lot of panels and hidden staircases and all that silly stuff. It was cute and fun. Ralph

Spence was the author, and he had worked for Buster at the studios before, worked on pictures, good writer.

Three Men On A Horse was a famous Broadway show, well The Gorilla was too for that matter, and Buster's character was a greeting card writer, he wrote poems for greetings cards, and the other three character people were race-track semi-gangster types, I don't remember what all it was about except that it seemed to me they latched on to Buster because he was accidentally picking all the winning horses.

Merton Of The Movies was a famous Broadway show, and he'd been all young juvenile ingenue people, the young man was gonna go to Hollywood and be a big star, that was what he wanted to do, and of course he had no talent. He wanted to be a big dramatic star, but he was so bad he was hilariously funny, and he became a big comedy star without even knowing it. They kept doing all these takes until they had put together a really good comedy movie and he still thought he was being a dramatic actor he was so naive. When he found out it practically broke his heart. That was the background for that one. Well, for Buster to do it in the late fifties they had to age everybody, but other than that they stayed with the show. It was a funny good show.

SUNSET BOULEVARD

All I know about that is that he was only there one day, shot one day, he may have gone up for a fitting on a tuxedo the day before or something, but they only worked one day, and they had a wonderful time, because everybody at the bridge table knew each other, the only outsider in that whole scene that didn't know each other was Bill Holden.

Between one thing and another I was pretty much in business as an actor once more. And Robert Smith, a screen writer, was talking to Paramount about doing a screen biography of me. Doing a one day job in a picture such as Sunset Boulevard- in which I worked with old pals like Erich von Stroheim- came to seem even more of a lark than a happy opportunity to grab a fast thousand bucks.

I think Von Stroheim used to play bridge and all. I know we saw him one of the times at Medrano, we look up and there he is sitting in the front, he's a creature to sit in the front row at a circus, and he'd come out to see Buster with his ladyfriend. Afterwards we went out to supper. Strangely a very charming man. It wasn't all that long, a year or two, before he died. He was quite a bit older than Buster I think. He was over here also in the silent days, and everybody knew each other then, because the business was small. There were only just a certain amount of companies, the studios doubled and tripled the minute sound came in.

Gloria Swanson: 'The tone of the piece was a mixture of gothic eeriness and nostalgia for the old Hollywood of the twenties. For Norma Desmond's butler and ex-husband, they had signed Erich von Stroheim. For a group of old friends- referred to as 'the waxworks' by Joe Gillis- [played by William Holden]-who arrive to play bridge with Norma (Desmond), they had signed Anna Q. Nilsson, H.B. Warner, and Buster Keaton.'...'Buster Keaton, the fourth member of the bridge party, looked ravaged, as indeed he had been, by alcohol. The last time we had spent any time together, he was still married to Natalie Talmadge and I was the Marquise de Falaise.

"Waxworks is right." Buster muttered in his unmatchable deadpan, as the four of us assembled for the scene, and we all howled with laughter.'

Did he get on with Gloria Swanson?

Sure. She was basically a comedian in the early days.

But he didn't look that ravaged...

No.

Did you see the movie?

Yes. I haven't seen it in years.

Late in November I was among the ten silent stars who were presented with gold plaques at the first annual George Eastman Festival of Film Arts at Rochester, New York. Only six of us- Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish, Mae Marsh, Harold Lloyd, Richard Barthelmess, and myself- were able to attend. The other four old stars who couldn't come were Norma Talmadge, Gloria Swanson, Ronald Colman, and Charlie Chaplin. Jesse Lasky made the presentations, and similar plaques were given to five famous directors and five cameramen whose work from 1915 to 1925 contributed much to the advancement of motion-picture entertainment.

He enjoyed it because it was a big social occasion, it was like the academy awards kind of thing, but in Rochester New York, and we had a ball because he hadn't seen Pickford and a bunch of.. he hadn't seen them in a long time, and they went off to do their rehearsing and whatever they had to do, and I spent an afternoon and evening with Buddy Rogers who was married to Mary Pickford at that time, and we sat together in the theater. And the whole thing was fun, it was a good time. The best part of it was they ran us.... it was february or something, but it was cold, and we got in like eight or nine at night , and they took us straight to the hotel and checked us in, and we probably had a snack and went to bed. And the whole end of our living room was glass, with traverse curtains coming in, and the next thing, I remember Buster shaking me, he says,

"Wake up! Look!. Wake up! Look!." And I says,

"What! Are we on fire? Or what's the problem?" And I sat up and looked, and he'd opened the curtains and it was snowing. The most beautiful picture you ever saw in your life, with this snow coming down. I had never been in snow in my life. I went crazy, I wanted to run out in my robe and slippers. What a beautiful picture that was. I've got a picture of Buster and I, with both of us throwing snowballs or something, in the snow, after we were dressed.

1951

Raymond Rohauer: "Back in the early fifties, when I ran a theater in Los Angeles, Buster Keaton himself used to buy a ticket like anyone else [to his own movies], because none of my ticket takers recognized him."

We went exactly once, it was to see The General, and Christian Chester, who was his right hand man, spotted Buster the minute we came through the door, escorted us in, and went up and told Raymond we were there, and Raymond came down, 'cause he used to run the projector, he came down and said, "Hi, I want to talk to you after." and he went back up. So that was the truth of that. Rohauer fictionalized a lot of wonderful things. Many, many things that you will hear Raymond say are to glorify himself. All he ever said was, "I'm the background person, I don't want to be recognized, I don't want to be known, I don't want my name on things, I'm just promoting the pictures." But every other thing you see has Raymond Rohauer's name on it, and he was giving interviews and everything, all the time.

LIMELIGHT²⁵³

The second time I took Charlie [Chaplin] unawares was on the day in 1951 when he sent for me to discuss doing a scene with him for *Limelight*, the last picture he made in this country.

He seemed astonished at my appearance. Apparently he had expected to see a physical and mental wreck. But I was in fine fettle. I'd just been in New York for four months doing an average of two TV guest shots a week. So I was prosperous and looked it.

"What have you been doing, Buster?" he asked. "You look in such fine shape."

"Do you look at television, Charlie?" I asked.

"Good heavens, no." he exclaimed. "I hate it. I will not permit it in my house. The idea of actors letting themselves be shown on that lousy, stinking, little screen!"

"Don't you even have it in the kids' rooms, Charlie?"

"There last of all. Oona has enough trouble as it is with the lively little bouncers. They are darlings, but mischievous. There would be no controlling them at all if we let them see all that tripe on television. Should be done away with. It is ruining the whole country."²⁵⁴ Then he said again, "But Buster, tell me, how do you manage to stay in such good shape. What makes you so spry?"

"Television." I said. He gasped, choked, got red, then said,

"Now about this sequence we're going to do together."

The subject of TV was not mentioned again during the three days we did the sequence in *Limelight* in which I played the near-blind pianist and he the fiddler.

As I remember he had a wonderful time, I don't know whether Chaplin did or not. I always wondered, because the rumor started and got bigger and bigger and turned into fact sort of, that Buster was so much funnier than Chaplin in that whole sequence that they cut it down to absolutely nothing in the editing. Now I always thought that Raymond Rohauer started that. People said that Chaplin had cut a lot of the good stuff out and left just a very small portion. So, what reason being, I don't know.²⁵⁵

I was never on the set of *Limelight*, so I don't really know what all was cut out or anything. I know he worked on the film for three weeks, and I went there for lunch the very last day they were shooting and that's all I know about it.

I went there to have lunch with Buster the very last day, and I met Chaplin, just "How do you do, how are you.." sort of thing, that was all I saw and I don't know how much they originally got, but they did shoot for a week. You can get an awful lot on film in a week. That's the only time I met Chaplin, and he was very polite and went back to his directing. They were getting ready to start again because it was right after lunch, he didn't stay around. I just stayed there and watched through the afternoon and they finished quite early, so I was probably only there two or three hours.

When Martha Raye had her show in New York, by then Chaplin was living in Switzerland, and I'm sure that if they had tried to get permission they wouldn't have gotten permission, so they probably just went ahead and did this one sketch out of the movie and hoped they wouldn't get sued or whatever, but probably Chaplin never heard about it, I don't know. Buster wouldn't have had anything,

²⁵³[Banned in the U.S. for twenty years due to Chaplin's politics. When finally shown in 1972 it won an Oscar. I have no idea why.]

²⁵⁴[Chaplinologists please note, the harsh words reported here are almost certainly 100% accurate. The word television is notable for its absence in the index of 'My Autobiography'.]

²⁵⁵[Regardless of the truth or otherwise of this rumour, in the photo of Buster and Chaplin in *Limelight* that appears in 'My Autobiography' Buster is uncredited, which suggests some competitive feelings on Chaplin's part.]

it would have been the producers of Martha's show that would have been in trouble if it had happened. But anyway we sat one whole afternoon in a projection room and watched that particular sketch over and over and over while Martha and Buster watched it, and the writers took everything down, so they could do it exactly as it had been on the screen. She made a wonderful Chaplin. So it worked out very well, it was very funny.

He must have got a bit sick of seeing it so many times...

Buster possibly took a nap in the dark, who knows? But mostly it was for the writers benefit. She watched it two or three times and didn't stay for the whole time.

PARADISE FOR BUSTER.

1952. (Industrial short.)

That was The John Deere Company. It's a 45 minute film they show at their big showrooms in the belt where they sell tractors and all that kind of thing. When they bring out the new model they have this little show that they put on every night for a week or something to pull all the farmers in to see all the new equipment.

Have you seen it?

They never would allow it out of their hands. Raymond was on his knees for years trying to get it, but they wouldn't allow it out of their hands because they did not want anyone seeing the dated tractors, they only wanted people to see the new models. I think Joel Goss who used to work for Raymond, friend of mine, we talk on the phone every once in a while, he lives in New York, told me they finally got ahold of it. Somebody finally talked them out of it.

1953

L'INCANTEVOLE NEMICA.

Orso Film. (Cameo role in Italian film.)

While we were in Italy we performed in a musical revue. We started in Milano, and did everything all over down near Livorno. We did it for three months, it was a regular big musical show with chorus girl dancers. And sort of in the middle of that one we were in the area, like Livorno or somewhere, we never actually worked in Rome in the show, and he went over and worked on the week-end days off kind of thing, while everybody else was travelling by bus or something, we went over to Rome and he appeared in this Italian film one day. And then we hopped an overnight train and rejoined the company. So that must be what that was.

Sylvana Pamplani, she was the star of this film. She was fat, had black hair all over her body, didn't shave her legs or under her arms or anything like that, and, it was all in Italian of course, but she was very vulgar, just a horrifying female. And she was running around, whatever she was supposed to be, as I say we were only there one day, we didn't know what they were doing, but she had a real short costume on, her boobs were falling out, and, yeuk.

[Here Eleanor starts looking through a filmography she thought the most recent and fullest, and making any comment she likes.]

The Misadventures of Buster Keaton. British Lion. 1953. compilation from the TV show.

THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER.

Best of Broadway TV. Sylvia Fields, Zasu Pitts, Merle Oberon, Joan Bennett, Bert Lahr. Adaptation of the Kaufman and Hart play. Keaton plays Doctor Bradley.

That was fun. That was without an audience again. It hurts not to have laughs to help you along, but with good actors they just forged ahead and did it. It was a good show. A big show for C.B.S. - C.B.S. used to do a whole series called Playhouse Ninety, and they were all an hour and a half shows, this wasn't Playhouse Ninety, but in those days they used to do their dramatic shows in an hour and a half instead of an hour. Monty Wooley is the man that came to dinner, and he's a real nasty, irascible character. And he comes and he won't leave. He just stays, they can't get rid of him. Buster played his doctor, and Bert Lahr I think played Banjo, and Banjo was a take off on Harpo Marx.

The World of Alonzo Penniworth. Eddie Cantor Theater, 30 minutes. He's a travel agent... I have no idea...

Screenwriters Playhouse. Silent Partner. George Marshall directed.

That one was fun, because there's Bob Hope, Joe E. Brown, Buster, Zasu Pitts and Jack ? They're watching the Academy Awards Show on TV in a bar, and Bob Hope, who's on the Academy Awards gives a special medal to a producer who used to be his old partner, so that was the set up. Everybody in this thing except for Bob Hope was in the bar watching the show.

1955

Clyde Bruckman commits suicide with gun borrowed from Buster.

He wrote himself out, and everything he did was basically just old rehash stuff, there was nothing new. He was also a periodic drinker, he'd be sober for days and then come up drunk and all that kind of thing. And except for the jobs Buster gave him, writing the television shows and everything... Buster kept him and Hal Goodwin and a couple of others working on his TV shows. Of course he needed them, he wasn't really doing them any enormous favor. I think it was really not too long after Buster finished that series of films, the seventeen weeks live was before the film, he did thirteen of them, and Clyde worked on them and all that, and I don't really believe it was too long after they finished that, we either went to New York or Europe immediately after, we were packed and ready and the night that he finished the thing, we left the next morning for wherever we were going, and, so I don't remember now what it was, anyway it wasn't too long after that film sequence ended that he came and borrowed Buster's gun. Buster had a gun permit, and in the old days when he used to drive across country a lot he had a thing made where the gun can slip up under the dashboard and be there handy *just* in case, never was used or taken out of its compartment. He came and he said he was going to be driving up north for a fishing trip up into Montana or somewhere, and he asked to borrow the gun, and Buster let him have it, and he went down to a washroom bathroom connected to a restaurant and shot himself to death. He wouldn't do it at home, he didn't want to do it in front of his wife and he didn't want to mess up his house I guess, so he did it in this public restroom. And of course we found out from the Santa Monica police because they had traced the numbers on the gun and everything and

called Buster or came to see him, I don't remember now, and Buster told them that he loaned it to him and so forth and so on. And he said, "Well then when we're through with it do you want it back?" and Buster says, "No."

Do you know why he committed suicide?

Lack of money, lack of work which he bought on himself by drinking, y'know.

I gather he sold a story he'd already sold the rights to and the person sold to was sued and Clyde was blacklisted...

Well, every time he would get a job to write something, all he did was steal from himself, or Buster, or other people, he worked for Lloyd. Harold Lloyd hired him as a director as a result of Buster putting his name on one of his films as a director, and Lloyd needed a director so he hired him, well, in those days that was fine, he was good, and imaginative or whatever, but later, in the forties, early fifties when they were doing all this television, he was too far gone, drinking too much, he didn't have an original idea in his body, and he'd steal from himself, things he'd done before, and I guess that caught up with him.

What about the rest of Buster's pals from silent days?

Hal Goodwin who used to work on all the old TV shows, he was the villain in College, and he worked a lot, he was a young juvenile in the early days, and he worked all the time. In all the later years he was under contract at Fox, he used to do bits. He was a neighbour of ours out in the valley, and he got into real estate, and he's the one that found our house for us and all.

We used to go out and have dinner with Ed and Ebba Sedgwick about once a week out in the Valley, we didn't live out there then. He and Buster shared an office at MGM. One Winter Lucille Ball got a mountain cabin in Rightwood and we went up in the winter to play in the snow and whatever, and Ebba got sick and Buster and I ran her home and then went back up again. We keep missing things altogether or almost. We were packed and ready to go to Europe when... and I had just shampooed my hair and had it rolled up, everything else, the phone rang and Ed had died. He died in his sleep in bed. I don't know who phoned, I don't think it was Ebba but somebody phoned us, and we jumped in the car and went out there and spent a few hours but we had no choice but to leave, so we couldn't stay for the services or anything, but Ebba understood, she knew that.

That's the business isn't it?

Uhuh.

So Lucille Ball was also a friend of Sedgwick...

Oh yeah, very close, he was like her second father, her only father actually, because her mother and father had separated very early, almost when she was a child.

Can you throw any light on how Lucille was around Buster?

She was wonderful. We used to go out to the house and play cards all the time, Desi used to cook dinner, we were all good friends.

Lucille's only problem, never reflected or had anything to do with Buster, but she was very impatient. She asked me one time, we were working on the set together, whatever it was, I was working and so was she, it was her film, we weren't on the set at the time but I had my own clothes on, and she asked me, said,

"God, I love that blouse. Where'd you get it and what'd you pay for it?"

I didn't really think it was any of her business and I told her the little boutique down here in Culver city, but I was very vague about what I'd paid for it and she

got angry. She wanted to know every detail and she wanted me to tell her. But it was one of those things, it passed, that was the end of the conversation and the end of her anger, but that's the kind of thing, she'd be impatient about things like that. When she wanted an answer and it wasn't *immediately* forthcoming, didn't matter what it was about. But other than that she was fine. We were, y'know, quite good friends. I saw her a couple of weeks before she died, and I hadn't seen her in a long time. I just went over and said,

"Hi Lucy, how are you? And she didn't realise I already knew her husband, she introduced me to Gary. He was a night club, saloon, stand-up comic. He was a nonentity so to speak. He lives down in Palm Springs now, because he plays golf, I guess all the time. She adored Buster, they got along like a couple of kids, y'know. I have nothing bad to ever say about her, except as I say she would get impatient. She was a semi-perfectionist I would say. She was perfectionist about her work, and if she would get an actor on the show that didn't turn out, y'know, that wasn't good at remembering their lines or didn't do things properly in any way, in other words, she didn't do the hiring, she had casting people, and if they hired someone that wasn't capable of keeping up with her I would imagine that there were a few words exchanged, possibly with casting people, or she might even yell at the actor if they were bad enough. I don't know, it's pure speculation on my part. So if she got bad reviews with people it probably had to do with work. Socially she was fine. She was such a workaholic she had very little social life outside of home and studio. Buster worked with her on a TV special that was a tribute to Stan Laurel I think, and they did a sketch together.

Hedda Hopper: 'Lucille Ball... even survived after she gave Desi Arnaz the shock of his life by divorcing him..' Any comment?

Well, he was a drunk and he was playing around. He always played around.

He was in the army for a year, year and a half of the early part of their marriage. Did Buster know them at that point.

Yes, we used to go up to the house and play cards and everything. We started going up and playing cards at her house when he was gone, he was somewhere else. He never was shipped overseas, but he was in Georgia or somewhere.

During the year and a half that he was in the service he only was home a couple of times, for a week or two.

Did you meet any of the rest of his old twenties crew?

The Movies crews?

Yes.

No. Marian Mack was the only leading lady I ever met. And of course I knew Hal Goodwin, but other actors in the picture, no. I met Gabe Gabourie of course, because Gabe was one of the head construction people at MGM after Buster.... He went to MGM with Buster. Do you remember a film, 'San Francisco', with Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy, he was the one that created and built the earthquake.

Gabourie must have learnt an enormous amount from Buster, and yet he gets promoted to a very high position at MGM, and Buster basically gets the elbow, in the same period...

Uhuh. Well, it was a different situation, Gabourie had nothing to do with the artistic side and was essentially his own boss, whereas Buster had seventeen bosses over him, the top notch being Louis B. Mayer who disliked him, so it's a different situation altogether. While Gabourie was being lauded and promoted, Buster's being put down.

Also Willie, Buster's manservant at the studio, he went to MGM too. They were the two people that actually went there and stayed.

Buster's manservant?

Buster's Butler. He had one. He worked at the studio with him, always at the studio, and chauffeured for him and everything. He didn't work at home. Buster called him Carruthers, because they thought that was a very elegant name for a Butler, thought it was more dignified, his real name was Willie. But Carruthers went to MGM with him and ran the bungalow and took care of his wardrobe, y'know, everything. He joined the father Divine movement, in the middle thirties I guess it was, and his name was changed after he joined the church, he and his wife both, his name was Eli Prosper after that. He was a darling man, a wonderful little man.

Carruthers stayed with MGM until he retired, and I'm sure he was older than Buster to begin with, so he was a very old, very dignified white haired gentleman by the time he retired. I can't remember what his position was there, but he had a job and he was there all those years.

Did you know Jean Havez?

He was Ebba Sedgwick's first husband. She later married Ed after Jean died. Jean was very big and fat and he probably popped off with a heart attack, of course, Ed Sedgwick was too and that's how he died. So Ebba had a penchant for fat men I guess.

1956

There was a wild blue Jay that used to swoop down and peck his head and his brother Harry's head when they'd go between the house and the garage. They have sharp beaks. That's why they started the whole training because they were getting bloody on top of the head. Of course it was Buster much more than Harry, Harry didn't have that much occasion to go to the garage, because our car was there and he didn't drive our car, only if he had some reason to get out there did he get it.

Buster put the peanuts out on the ground first and the bird would come and get them, then finally he decided to hold them in his hand and the bird came to his hand. Early 55, before we moved to the Valley to the ranch, that was the last year we were in Myras house, she died in 55 and we put the house up for sale and moved shortly, two or three months. In there was the whole bird situation, before her passing away up until the time we moved. But the bird got so tame that he used to come and sit on the back porch rail and squawk until somebody came out to give him... he got to where he'd take peanuts from me or anybody, and one day I deliberately left the back door open, and we used to keep a sack of peanuts in the window in the house, and I was doing something in the kitchen and I hear this rustling around, this carrying on, and I looked and he was headfirst in the bag getting his own peanuts inside the house. Then later on, when his children hatched, he had three babies, and he brought them over to sit on the porch rail, while mother stayed up way high on a telegraph wire screaming and carrying on because she knew her children were gonna be killed. We left a large amount of food and peanuts and everything for the neighbour to

feed him after we'd moved, because we didn't want to separate him from his wife and children. Could've taken him, could've picked him right up and put him in a cage but we didn't do it.

The Buster Keaton Story.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN.

...the constitution of an ox.

>1957. Family. Around the World in 80 Days. Buster Keaton Story.

Myra Keaton Dies.

When Harry was working bar-tending, for what reason I don't know, they were trying to get a cemetery off the ground and established, and in order to claim the land, they had to bury four unclaimed bodies out of the morgue, and then sell a certain amount of graves to establish this thing, otherwise they couldn't get the permissions to make a cemetery out of it. So somehow he knew one of the men that was doing this and he was working at the time, so very very little money, he'd bought two graves. So when Myra died, we were in Europe and we couldn't get back, Buster was in the middle of a film, it was a pilot for television for Mr. Pastry, Dicky Hearn, bless his little heart, we were in the middle of that and we couldn't get back. And Buster said,

"What am I going to do?" and I said,

"If you were able to get on a plane.." this was at night when we heard about it, or late afternoon, .."you'd get there just in time for the services. You wouldn't be any help to Louise in organizing things, and you would have to get on the next plane right back and you'd be a basket case." y'know, exhausted. "Besides the fact that they would realize what's going on, they wouldn't resent it, but you would be holding up production." So he decided, we sent a cable and said 'It's impossible. Do as you see fit. Do what you need to do. We'll pay the bill when we get home.' Which would have been only just a couple of weeks later. So that's the way it worked out. Louise's best friend, Toni Harrison, who came from a super-large family and knew how to go about all of these things with mortuaries and things, she took charge and did everything actually. Toni and Lytle Harrison, they had gone to school with Louise and Harry, all through high school years and everything. They're both still alive.[1993] Well along but alive. Anyway, Louise was the next one to go. When she got bad I got her out of her apartment, and into a board and care situation, right out here in the valley, so I could see her two or three times a week and keep track of her, because she had lived down in L.A. and it was a chore to do that. She couldn't look after herself much anymore anyway, she was cancer ridden from one end to the other,...

Was she a smoker?

Yeah. But the cancer was everywhere, it wasn't just confined to her lungs or her heart or anything. But anyway, after I got her out of the apartment and out here and into the board and care, she lasted about another year, and she had social security and insurance and whatever that took care of her financially, so that wasn't a problem. I think she's been gone maybe about ten years. Harry didn't even come up for her funeral. And Harry lasted another couple of years after that. He had a stroke, and went down on the sidewalk out in front of the motel where he lived. He never regained consciousness, I think they said he lived two or three days. I can't even remember who got in touch with me. Somebody knew how to find me, got in touch with me. And I called Jingles, Jingles Two, Harry's son with Ernestine, Harry's only wife, the only time he was ever married, and that only lasted three years, something like that. Jingles Two, was born on Christmas day. It was during the war sometime, but it was after Pearl Harbor because things were difficult to come by, baby clothes and that kind of thing,

hard to find anything...the poor child, he was raised with almost no clothes till after the war ended.

But anyway, I called Jingles Two, and I said,

"I'm working, and I can't do much about it." getting clear down to San Diego, it's close to a hundred and fifty miles down to where he was, and arrange everything, and take care of everything. And I said,

"I'm afraid you're going to have to do it." He also had social security and whatever, and Jingles was making good money, so we didn't discuss money at all. And he got down there and arranged everything, and he was packing up his belongings in this motel, he always lived in a motel room, and accidentally got into something, it was like an extra can of tooth powder, or shaving cream, or one of those tin things, and he saw the top was kind of semi-loose, he took it apart and there was a whole roll of money in it. So then he started going through everything he could. His wife was with him, and they found just under four thousand dollars stashed in different places in this room. So that took care of the money problems of funerals and that kind of thing. So it didn't cost Jingles anything either then to bury his father.

The two graves that Harry bought, Myra was buried in the first one. Louise went next, but I had her cremated, and they permitted me to put her ashes in Myra's grave. Then Harry is next to them. He went a couple of years later. So the three of them are all together. They're up on the hill here at the back of the valley. It's sort of like Forest Lawn but way on the opposite end of the San Fernando Valley. It sounds like, apart from not really liking Harry you didn't have any trouble at all with Buster's family.

No no no. We all got along quite well. Louise came every week-end, she was out at the house, when we were there, we were only home six months of the year, but whenever we were home she was there. She'd come out on Friday right from work and go home Sunday evening. Sunday afternoon Buster took her to the market and bought everything in sight so she never had to buy food, she always had (laughs) a car loaded with food to go home.

This is when she was working?

Oh yeah. And had her own apartment and everything. But I guess he didn't know what else he could do for her and he felt he wanted to do something for her, so he kept her fed.

Do you think that in some ways, by supporting the family at such an incredibly early age, Buster actually took on more than he could really handle, in the long term?

He never took on more than he could handle. I don't think he ever resented it, except Harry. It wasn't that he resented supporting and feeding Harry, it's just that Harry was such a leach and expected and demanded it, where the rest of the family didn't. Louise was perfectly willing to go out and work for a living, and wanted to. But it was the fact that Harry just would not do anything for himself.

Did Buster actually like Harry?

I think as a brother, he had to like his brother, but he had no respect for him, how could you?

The Martha Raye Show was the sixth of March, '56.

The Lord Don't Play Favorites. This one was done here at N.B.C. It seems to me it was a circus/carnival type background, the circus gets stranded in Kansas, and

it was Buster and Robert Stack and Kaye Starr, Louis Armstrong, I don't remember what it was about.

From here on Eleanor is referring back to her appointments diary for Buster, where they were and what they were doing, and commenting from her memory. Dates given are therefore shooting and performing dates, and not, as has so far been the case, release dates...

Then on the seventeenth of October 1956 was Around The World In Eighty days. Buster's part was in Durango, Colorado, where they did the train chases with the indians shooting arrows and all that kind of thing, he was the conductor on the train, and we were up there somewhere between one week and two weeks. I wasn't around the shooting too much because everything they did was travelling. Whatever they used, 148 millimeter color, they couldn't use process²⁵⁶, everything had to be real. So they had to mount the cameras either outside the train looking in the window or inside the train. The indians and everything out the window were real. Everbody would plod up the hill and get ready, and then they'd roar down the hill with the indians shooting arrows.. So obviously I was not near any of that. But when it came time, Buster was supposed to be shot in the back and be killed, they didn't have enough distance to get enough force to drive the arrow into the cork that he was wearing. So it would stick and then kind of droop. So Buster finally said,

"I'll fix it. Do it again." So they did it one more time, and he pulled the arrow out and got very angry because it had torn his coat, so that's the way they did the gag. So then he had to stay in the rest of the sequence, until they got to the part where they picked up Joe E. Brown at the next stop. But in the script, he was supposed to be killed by the arrow. But if you see the film he's obviously not killed.

One of the times we had fun, Buster and I had a room with twin beds and Phil Van Zandt and Key Luke had a room on the other side of the wall, so we had this little nothing kind of wall between the heads of our beds, and we'd go to bed at night and talk through the wall. (Laughs) We had to raise our voice but we could talk, they'd start reminiscing about this or that talking back and forth through the wall of the motel. That was kinda fun.

John Carradine would leave every day, they'd say eight o'clock tomorrow or whatever, he went right straight to the closest bar and got totally smashed out of his mind. He was the type of alcoholic, he'd wake up and work all day, and he wasn't off that set an hour and he was drunk. It was amazing. I never could understand how he could keep going. I think he probably had so much in his system that it only took a couple of drinks to get him drunk, it didn't take a whole bunch of drinks.

Mike Todd loved Buster. Afterwards we were in New York for something, and the phone rang, and Buster picked it up, and Mike says,

"Get your pants on and get down here we're going out to dinner." He didn't say who he was or anything. Buster says,

"How much time do I have?"

"I'll give you fifteen minutes." We were dressed of course, and I combed my hair or he combed his hair, whatever, we went downstairs, and he picked us up in the limo. And he says,

²⁵⁶[back projection.]

"We're going to Luchows." Which is *The* restaurant of the world, my favorite restaurant in the world. I don't know, it sounds Chinese but it was German, wonderful German food. And they used to have strolling violinists that would come around, that kind of thing. He says,

"We've got to pick up a broad on the way." We stopped, we sat in the car, he goes in and two minutes later comes out with Marlene Dietrich. That's the broad he had to pick up. I said,

"Wha.. alright." So we went on down to Luchows, and the minute we walked through the door, all the violinists, the strolling orchestra all start with Lili Marlene, the tune, her theme song. We had a nice dinner. She wasn't very talky, Mike did most of the talking, naturally, and maybe Buster got into it. I didn't remember talking, and I don't think she did much in the way of talking, we just had a nice quiet dinner. She talked about baby sitting her daughters children, she was a real good cook, although Mike may have done all the talking about her cooking, but I can't remember anything in particular.

I always remember that because of him giving us no notice whatever to go to dinner and then picking up his broad. (Laughs) He was wonderful. He was crazy about Buster, Buster was crazy about him. It was like one of those instant buddy things. You say, 'Hello, how are you?' and you know you're going to be friends, immediately.

Garry Moore: 'We put him on for two weeks, and I said "Buster, what are we going to do when we run out of those great routines of yours?" He said,

"Don't worry, I move funny; there are plenty of things we can do."

So after we used up those routines of his, like putting the drunk to bed, we put him on as a comic cameraman. But when you're doing five days a week, you have no time for rehearsal, and that kind of business he did had to be perfectly timed. Like if he was going to turn around and step into a bucket of paste, you have to be able to do it naturally- you can't be looking around for the bucket. But with so little rehearsal, it just didn't work out, and we had to let him go. It was so sad- imagine me letting Buster Keaton go.

I asked him how he did all those falls, and he said, 'I'll show you.' He opened his jacket and he was all bruised. So that's how he did it- it hurt- but you had to care enough not to care.'

No. He never was full of bruises, these are all peoples versions of what they think should have happened to him. That's that. They make these things up.

It's fiction?

Yes. I mean the first part with Garry, yes, he was a wonderful, fun guy to work with, because he used to put on Buster's make-up, and they'd do one of those silly routines, in the mirror where they moved alike, before you realised that there's two people. He did that a couple of times because Garry did look a lot like Buster, but he was a little bit bigger. He was a comic, a real good comedian, and he had his own show, a talk show basically, in an hour show he'd have four guests, and if it was a girl singer, they'd talk and she'd sing, in Buster's case he'd talk and then do a thing, or he and Garry would work together. But it was that kind of a show, like the late night talk shows they have now, like Johnny Carson was, they have entertainment and just talk, and it was a daytime show, one of the very first good ones. He was on for long years until he retired

I've got this extraordinary quote...

[Dardis.] 'Garry Moore...was taken aback when Buster had trouble jumping through a hoop, for he could not go through smoothly and kept hitting the edge with his shoes. Moore claimed that he couldn't stop

Buster from doing it over and over until Buster's shins were literally bloody. Moore became so terrified he stopped having Buster on the show.'

I couldn't fit it with Buster's personality, he's not the kind of guy, surely, to go on hurting himself after he knows he can't do it?

I never heard of that, and I was with him at all times through his entire television career. If he was going to do a trick, he did a trick. If he went and jumped over something, or out a window or anything like that where he scraped his shins, he would darn well go pad his shins or pad the window sill, but he wouldn't do it more than once without fixing it. He was not masochistic.

He reminisces about his days of fame and affluence with cheerful resignation.

I had a lot of money and I lent a lot. And I drank too much.

1957

Medrano

Edmind Wilson: 'His act... a presser's boy, morose and detached, attempting to deliver a dress suit while the circus is going on-seemed the best thing I had seen him do.'

Paul Gallico: 'He was carrying a mouldy-looking dress suit on a hanger, obviously looking for a cleaner. Before he had done, the suit was a wreck on the arena floor and the audience was in hysterics.'

A friend of Buster asks to see The Cameraman projected, a studio executive tells him..

"The present print is worn out. It's been our training picture. Ever since 1928 we've made each new comedian study it. From Durante to Abbott and Costello, from Mickey Rooney to Red Skelton and the Marx Brothers."

December. 5. M-G-M. lab reports. The Cameraman. Negative is unprintable. First reel is missing. Spite Marriage. Negative is unprintable. Torn perforations and is excessively shrunken. ²⁵⁷

THE BUSTER KEATON STORY .

For Gods sake, it's the worst thing ever made, and don't go see it. They got Buster drunk in the first reel, and kept him drunk through the whole movie. It was just outrageous.

Two weeks later I almost died.

One afternoon in December I started hemorrhaging. This was the aftermath of coughing too much while suffering from a cold. Medication did not ease the attack, and our physician, Dr. John F. Fahey, instructed Eleanor to take me to the hospital if the hemorrhages did not stop by eight o'clock. Because I am a World War 1 veteran, he suggested the Veterans Administration Hospital at Sawtelle as it was superbly equipped to treat such an emergency.

The hemorrhaging continued while Eleanor was driving me to Sawtelle. Taken to the emergency room I was rushed straight to the operating room where teams of from five to eight physicians worked over me. They were unable to stop the bleeding for twenty-seven hours. During that night I had to be given blood transfusions continually to replace the blood I was losing.

The next morning Eleanor was advised to summon my boys, my sister and brother. The doctors said it was impossible to tell how long I had to live. However, Eleanor

²⁵⁷[A reinstated version of 'The Cameraman' is now available.]

was also told that if I could survive the next five or six days I might possibly pull through.

I will spare my readers further harrowing details, except to say that when Eleanor saw me during that critical period I had so many tubes coming out of my nostrils and other parts of my body that I looked to her like an octopus.

He was in the hospital... he ruptured a blood vein in the oesophagus. Anyway, they pumped sixteen pints of blood back in to him. Because it took them something like 24 hours to get the bleeding to totally stop. So between doing that and being in the hospital for three weeks, and after about the first five days on I.V. then he started with real food again. So he was fine the last two weeks he was there actually he was fine, getting okay, and he was eating and everything like that, recovering his strength. He came home, they released him for a weekend to come home, so I took him home on saturday afternoon and took him back sunday afternoon, and then they kept him another week, they just wanted to be sure there was no internal bleeding still going on, and that was the end of that. But, as I remember he came home permanently on christmas eve, so this whole drama was in December, and I don't remember when The Keaton Story started, but it started within weeks I think.

But after two weeks in the hospital I was able to get up and stand on my feet. Dr. Avedon, the staff physician in charge of my case, told me I had the constitution of an ox.

"You can live to be a hundred years old," he said, adding, "that is if you never take another drink and cut out eating highly seasoned foods."

I thought it over, decided that it was worth while sacrificing liquor, light wines, and beer, chili con carne, and all the rest if it would prolong my life.

He never mentioned smoking?

No. I always hated the doctor for that because he had been in the hospital for three weeks, and of course he hadn't had a cigarette that whole time, and the worst of the nicotine fits would have been over by then. When he was ready to be released he asked the doctor,

"Can I smoke?" The doctor said,

"Yeah, if you just don't smoke too much, and only smoke just a little bit, don't smoke the whole cigarette, just smoke the end and put it out, and try to cut way down, just a few a day, you'll be fine."

I could have killed him, because he hadn't had a cigarette in three weeks, and if the doctor had just said, 'No. Don't ever smoke again.' I think Buster would have obeyed that. He probably would have never smoked again. The doctor certainly should have said something.

I smoked too at that time. But of course in those days they didn't know that cigarettes were the big villain in life, which everybody knows now. The general public didn't know it was a health problem to everybody, including non-smokers that were in the room with smokers, we'd never heard of that at that time.

Nobody really knew that it was a big health problem, it was only a health problem to him at that moment, that he should've stopped. In the last few years he used a cigarette holder with a filter, *after it was too late.*

While I was in hospital the deal with Paramount to make a screen biography of my life was completed. The writer, Robert Smith, came to the hospital one day and waved a check at me. He said (according to what I read in the newspapers later on), "Here is \$50,000 of Paramount's money. That's for the screen rights to your life story, Buster. Are you going to lie there and die, or are you going to get up and spend it?"

The idea of having my biography filmed did not bring me out of the hospital, of course, but it helped.

That's been widely publicized, and it's widely fictitious, but then who cares?

I do!

Bob Smith never came to the hospital, Sidney Shelton who has since become a big-time writer, came to the house, after Buster was out of the hospital and home, and the same, the money and the whole thing was there, involved. It didn't help Buster get well or get out of the hospital.

The shooting at Paramount for The Keaton Story, started April 16th. '56. And he was there probably about eight weeks. That was another horror story. They just came and told Buster they wanted to make the film, and he would have story approval, script approval. And afterwards he said,

"Forget that, they always do as they damn well please anyway. And if you start arguing all you get is an ulcer on your ulcer. So let 'em just go do what they want to do." So the only real squawk that occurred that caused a change was from Donald O'Connor, because they had Buster born and raised in a circus, and Donald says,

"No Way!" so he raised a row until they changed that. Donald O'Connor's the one who raised such a row, and got them to change it back to vaudeville where it belonged. Buster never read the script until the day he went to work at the studio, the first day.

Why?

He didn't want to. He didn't want to get upset and irritated and he knew he would. He and Donald went off to another rehearsal hall or somewhere and worked together the whole time setting up the gags they were to photograph and everything. And they had to use just inexpensive.. they couldn't do any of the good big stuff because price was out of reason by then, Buster would make a whole picture for a hundred and fifty thousand, and it would have cost two hundred thousand to do some of the gags today. Everything they did they took from Keaton films, but they took inexpensive type things. They took the putting the girl to bed from Spite Marriage, and they gave me complete wardrobe to double Ann Blyth because she was the wife that would be doing it, and Ann at that time was always pregnant, she had five kids in a row, one after another, so he said we'd better get a back up here in case she's pregnant, she can't take that beating in one take. So I was totally wardrobed, but she was fine and did it herself with Donald. But we went to the first preview at a theater over in Glendale, and we practically crawled out on our hands and knees to get away, and just got away as quick as we possibly could, almost before the thing ended, it was so horrible. The first thing they did.. they had made the Lillian Roth life story, 'I'll Cry Tomorrow', and she was a big saloon singer, also a big drunk, and it was a big smash hit movie, and made a lot of money. So in their minds, 'One drunk's good, let's make another.' That was the kind of feeling. So, in this film, they combined, Ann Blyth was all the wives, and none of them were right in time. And, as I remember, I don't believe there was any children involved at all. And they got Buster drunk in the first reel, and kept him drunk through the whole movie, which was over a period of like years it took in the movie. It was just outrageous.

And Donald O'Connor was acting that drunk?

**Yes. He hated every minute of it, the only thing he enjoyed was working with Buster on the comedy stunts, he's always said that. Every time I look at him he says,
"Don't mention it." (Laughs)**

And it was a strange and wonderful experience working with Donald O'Connor who played Buster Keaton in Paramount's 'The Buster Keaton Story'. Donald was first-rate in that movie, I thought, though he kept confessing to newspaper people that he could not do my teacup roll. That's the one in which, while carrying a tray with a teacup on it, I tumble and do a somersault without upsetting the cup.²⁵⁸ One other thing Donald could not figure out was that old trick of Pop's, the one in which my father put one leg up on a table, then the other, and seemed to be sitting on nothing, hanging in the air, until he crashed to the floor.²⁵⁹

Donald O'Connor: "First time I met Buster I went out to his house, and Eleanor said, 'He's out in the garage, and incidentally, he's trying to quit smoking.' I said, 'Oh really, Okay, I won't smoke around him then.'" So I went out in the garage, and this was Buster's idea of giving up smoking. He was working on something at the bench, and he had a little train that went all the way around inside the garage. So, when I walked in he had just taken a puff off his cigarette, and he put it on the train, and it slowly went around, all the way around inside, and he stopped it and then he took another puff on the cigarette, but this was his idea, it was taking all this time to get around, that was his idea of giving up smoking. (Laughs) "

Could have been, I don't know. I never heard Buster say he was going to give up smoking, but he could say things to guys to make jokes and conversation that he'd never say to me or in front of me.

So he might have actually used you to set up a gag on Donald?

Could have, yes.

It's just that Donald O'Connor seems almost over enthusiastic in some ways talking about Buster because he obviously was very much in love with him...

Oh, he adored Buster, yes. See, they had the same background, Donald was from a vaudeville family, much later of course, and he'd been working since he was three, and they didn't even have the advantages of Buster because vaudeville was dead before he started, and they always had second and third rate theaters and audiences, where Buster was all first class with his family. But they grew up the same way, had all the same background and history. So it was like brothers, they knew each other immediately. Buster was only on set with Donald when he was doing the comedy scenes, not the dramatic scenes. He didn't want to. He found a way to avoid being there, unless he could work with Donald.

Surely Buster was seriously pained by the whole affair, apart from the money...

The only thing about that was the whole thing happened so soon after he almost died, that he was so glad to be alive that I don't think he was allowing anything to bother him, in that respect. Plus the fact that he knew from the moment they came over and spent a half hour, and whatever they said at the house, he knew it was going to be a disaster.

How come?

²⁵⁸[See 'College']

²⁵⁹[See others on this stunt.]

Because they didn't know what they were talking about. You *know* when you've got a couple of idiots in the place, you know that. You don't have to wait for eight days to find that out. And Buster could spot those things.

So, what we've got to here is that from pretty much the time you knew him, his old attitude to work, i.e. 'I'm making it, it's got to be perfect', is completely gone, and his new attitude is, 'If they want to make rubbish, that's fine so long as they pay me.'?

Right. His whole thinking is he'd supported his family all his life, and as far as he knew he was going to have to continue to do it for the rest of his life, and you have to make money to do that. The thought that they could go out and make their own living, and get off his back for once in his entire life, never occurred to him. Except for Louise it didn't happen. When he was loaded he did not want her working because it reflected on him to be able to support her, but later on when she did office work and book-keeping and all that kind of stuff, no that's another story.

Donald O'Connor: "So right from the beginning what Buster was telling them was going in one ear and out the other; and they really didn't follow any of this magnificent story of Buster. They labored on the thing of the drinking period and I think everybody here has had a drinking problem one time or another, y'know, has had a lot of fun with booze, but that wasn't the paramount thing with him."

Jumping through peddling woman's tray from Sherlock Jnr... " And it was a marvellous trick, and it was very dangerous, you'd have to go from sunlight into this dark hole and lay out straight, there was no way to tuck and roll out of it, you had to lay out straight and worry about catching the back of your head going through the hole. When I dove through this tray that he was holding, they would let his legs down from in back of the wall, and the wall would close, this way, [demonstrates], and there was buckshot at the bottom of his skirt, and he'd walk away from the wall, and the camera would be on this blank wall.²⁶⁰ Of course, with Keaton around, standing watching, you had this feeling nothing's going to happen to you if he's around."

When Paramount did a remake of the scene [launching and sinking of The Boat.] in The Buster Keaton Story, they ran into the same problems trying to re-create the gag; and I ironed out the bugs for them in five minutes.²⁶¹

I told the construction department all about the bugs, how to eliminate them and how to prepare it in the first place. They improved on me in one way. Although they went out with a sea anchor, they built an extension to the launching ramp so that they could control the boat more easily. And then they brought the cable right back under the launching ramp to a powerful truck.

But that scene alone cost them \$60,000 to make- making The Boat, my salary included, cost only \$22,000

..My stomach turned over, it was so awful! We sneaked out of the theater practically on our hands and knees, it was just trash. It had nothing to do with him. Of course, he knew ahead of time that was going to happen. The only things that were halfway decent were the comedy sequences that he and Donald had recreated and copied.

After The Buster Keaton Story was made, Paramount sent me on a tour of the country to exploit the picture.

It must have been pretty embarrassing, promoting...

²⁶⁰[In Sherlock Jr. a blank wall is what you see, in this version the trickery in the wall is clearly visible to the critical eye.]

²⁶¹[See page 151-2.]

Yes! Oh, It's terrible. I was with him, and I was interviewed almost every town, the ladies department would come and interview me, y'know, while Buster was being interviewed, and it was awful to sit there with a straight face and not say, 'For Gods sake, it's the worst thing ever made, and don't go see it.' You don't dare say the truth, you've gotta sit there with a smile on your face, it's hard work. Fortunately it only lasted five or six weeks. But people do it all the time.

For years I'd heard stories about the inefficiency of the major studios, and often I had been in a position to observe examples of it. But they are not inefficient when they send you out on one of those trips: they work you like the town pump. They keep you busy night and day, plugging the picture in newspaper interviews, on the radio and TV. How did he do these plugs without revealing that it was a real stinker? This suggests a quite superhuman degree of tactfulness.

Uhuh. It takes it too.

Was Buster tactful in that sense?

Yes, he wouldn't have dared tell the truth.

Why not?

You're being paid by, and promoted by Paramount pictures, and you're going to go out and say their picture stinks? You can't do that. All you could do is to break your leg and refuse to go in the first place. That's the only way out of it.

Quite literally?

Yes!

So promotion actually came with the original contract?

Well, not necessarily, but there's a certain amount of force behind the request.

How do you mean?

Oh I don't know. They just say 'We want you to do this' and you've got to have a damn good excuse for not doing it. They've paid you an awful lot of money, and they expect to pay you quite a bit more to do this, so you've got to have a good excuse. And if you ever watch television or whatever you see all these poor souls out plugging horrifying pictures, I think back to us doing that too.

The stunt in Sherlock, Jr. where you dive through the peddling woman's tray, was that trick photography?

No, I just did this recently on Ed Sullivan's 'Toast of the Town'. I put it in the Donald O'Connor film, see. And they sent me East to plug the picture, so naturally Sullivan had me there. And we had this set built, and he says,

"It's marvellous what the trick department with the cameras can do." And I said,

"I want to show you how to do this camera trick."

So I did it in front of his audience. Of course, it is no camera trick. You do it in full view of the audience and on a full-lit stage. There's no lighting effects, no mirrors or anything. And it's really a great trick and it shocks an audience. And after the show was over, Sullivan sent for me. And I went up to his dressing-room and he says, "So I can't sleep tonight- how do you do it?"

I wouldn't tell 'im.

1957

March, a vodka ad, and March and April, Paramount tour to publicize the film, we got paid for that.

June 27 was somebody's broadcasting, I don't know.

June third, 'I've Got A Secret.'

July 21 started the last summer stock tour, started June twenty-first, and went until probably around the middle of November was that Merton of The Movies. And then he flew to New York and did 'What's My Line?' on September first.

**November tenth he did 'Playhouse Ninety', now that's an hour and a half
dramatic show that he was on.
December sixteenth, 'You Asked For It'.**



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT.

"This is it. I don't have to go inside."

1957>59. Ranch. Mayor Keaton. Commercials.

Buster buys Ranch. One and a half acres in San Fernando Valley. Nine walnut trees. New St. Bernard (Elmer 111)

When we returned from the tour Eleanor and I used Paramount's money to buy the home of our dreams. This is far out in the San Fernando Valley and stands on an acre and a quarter of ground. The house is a modern farmhouse with six spacious rooms furnished in early American, Paramount bought the house, but it was furnished by 'Truth and Consequences', 'This is Your Life', 'It Could be You', and other TV programs on which I made guest appearances. Eleanor's endless books of S & H stamps also helped furnish the place. Our swimming pool is of natural stone, and we decorate its borders with colored stones collected in each place we visit. The pool was paid for with some of the money I got for the TV commercials I have been doing for the last couple of years for Alka-Seltzer, Northwest Orient Airlines, and other firms. **We never had more than one dog at a time. When we bought the little farm out in Woodland Hills, he had to have chickens right away, so he could have eggs. So he bought a dozen red hens and a rooster. And he named them all, there was Zsa Zsa and Ava and Marilyn and Jayne, they all had names. All the sex symbols of the screen at that time. He built everything, they had a little red schoolhouse, was their home with the nests and everything,**

Penelope Gilliatt: 'He doesn't think that a chicken coop is much of a place to live, even for hens, so he has built a kind of New England schoolhouse for them, with a door that he described to me as being.. "six foot high, so that I can go in to see them." '

...and he built a picnic table and he used to put the food on the table and they'd all gather round and eat off the table, and the double outhouse was where the seed used to be kept, and he built a swing and a slide, it was a whole schoolyard that he built for them with the fence of course around it. The back of the schoolhouse opened enough that we could get in, the little front door was only this big. I just knew the rooster hated me, Buster could go anywhere he wanted, but he wouldn't let me in there. I used to have to take a broom and smack that rooster around to get in there to get the eggs, because he had spurs that long and they were like razors, he laid my leg open one time, really deep, so I used to have to smack him to get in there and collect eggs when Buster'd be away working for any length of time.

My favorite memory of Buster is doing his gardening out in the backyard. We had about an acre and a half, like a baby farm, and he used to put in a garden, and that was his favorite thing to do when he wasn't working. In fact he could do a lot of writing while he was doing that. He'd come in from working in his garden, whatever, and he would have half a sketch organized.

He liked to swim. He used to swim every day.

He had tracks that ran out and made a giant circle around a picnic table and then back into the garage again. One car would carry three hard-boiled eggs, and another would carry a hot dog and pickles, and radishes and olives, all kinds of things. He had this whole freight train that was full of food and he would take it out around the picnic table and stop it so everybody could take what they

wanted. And sometimes it was pretty strange, you'd open my refrigerator in the kitchen, and there'd be nothing in there except a freight train full of food waiting to go out. (Laughs).

In all our twenty-eight years together he never wrote a check. I did all the finance. He never wrote a check in his life. And he relied on everybody to do that for him, his Mother, his brother. The thing is Buster had no confidence in himself about handling money.

But he was booking the trains at eleven, and yet he doesn't want to handle money in later life...

Well, when he was a child and growing up, it was one of his duties to do that, because his father never had and his mother was busy socialising, and they just gave him that job so that was part of his job. But as an adult he had people to do everything for him, he didn't have to do it. When we were here and home, I took care of everything. I paid all the bills, I did all the banking, everything, and he wandered around with maybe five dollars in his pocket, or none, and go round charging things in the neighbourhood that I'd go back and pay for later. When we were in Woodland Hills, on our little farm out there, he'd go to the market to buy something, and he'd go on down to the hardware store if he needed something, because he was always building something, and he'd come back and he'd say, "Well you've got to go down to Dave's and pay him..." He'd bring all this stuff back, and he'd go with no money. So I would have to trail around after him and pay the bill. And they let him take anything he wanted out of the stores, they knew I'd show up a couple of hours later and pay for it.

The only time he ever carried money, for some reason, was in Europe or England. He had a pocketful of Francs, Lira, Pounds, whatever, and I was the one that was running round without any money. Strange... He had been to Europe so many more times than I had, he may have thought that I didn't know the difference between pounds and francs and dollars and lira, that I didn't know how to deal with foreign money. So he took charge of the money in Europe. But here in America he wouldn't have any money. When he was home he was home to relax and not think about anything, so that meant I took over finances and everything like that. He'd take maybe twenty dollars to pay cabs, but that was all. I always took care of all the money here in America.

I take it he must have been fairly well known and popular in all the shops.

Yes, they all knew him. He was the Mayor of Woodland Hills, honorary Mayor for about three or four years. He would open the little league season, which is baseball for children. When we moved to Woodland Hills the freeway did not come all the way out there, but when there was an extension that got to Woodland Hills he was out there with the ribbon cutting ceremony and all of that kind of thing, because he was Mayor. It didn't actually mean anything, he had nothing to do with running the town. All the little towns out in the Valley used to have Mayors. Steve Allen who was a comic writer, musician, everything, was the one that followed Buster.

This is your life.

Excerpt..

Host:... "devoted wife, sixteen years ago, Mrs. Keaton! Here's a pretty gal!" [Eleanor fixes Buster's tie with unintelligible conversation...]

Host: "What have these years of marriage to Buster meant, Eleanor?"

"We've been very happy. 'Course we've had some lean times too, but Buster's been so happy he's wanted to go back to work. I've been very proud of the way he's come back into prominence."

Host: "You bet, and America's happy to have him back. You developed an act so that Eleanor could appear with you, didn't you Buster?"

"Did you rehearse this?" [General laughter.]

This is your life gave Buster a one-man tractor as a gift

1958

January twenty-eight, we were at the Sombrero Playhouse in Phoenix, where he did, maybe Merton of the Movies, one of those, for two or three weeks.

He did the Betty White Show on February twelfth.

You Asked For it February sixteenth.

From February twenty-fifth, to April seventh, at The Desert Inn, that was The Newcomers of 1928, that was a little book show that he did, with Paul Whiteman, Harry Richman and Rudy Valee and himself were the four featured people in that.

April eleventh, a beer commercial.

April twenty-eighth to may twelfth, Moulin Rouge here in town, it was that same Newcomers show.

June fifth, another Playhouse Ninety. I can remember going to work with him one day on this thing. He plays a town character who's struck deaf and dumb at a trial in which he's accused of having killed his father. I can remember Hope Lang was the lead, because I sat and talked to her for a little while, and that's all I can remember about it. Those were live television, and they had a full weeks rehearsal for camera and everything, because with an hour and a half live show you've got to know what you're doing.

Right after that he made six or eight Alka-Seltzer commercials, oh they were wonderful. It was a whole series that ran almost a year on television, and once he was riding a little motor scooter, made up and dressed as the mailman, and he was on a rural road, putting it in the boxes out on the street, and the scooter got away from him somehow, skidded in gravel or something, and it flipped. I don't know if it landed on him or not, but he came home with an arm that was *that* big around [demonstrates] and purple and black and green and blue; and whatever it was he was going to do the next day, I mean they used that in the thing, it was an end for the joke, and whatever he had to do the next day didn't involve moving that much and they had to rip his sleeve and sew it together loosely so he could get his arm in it, it was that badly swollen. He went ahead and worked, he didn't miss a days work. He did things like that. He didn't count bruises as important. He always had bruises.

Then a series of North West Oregon Airline commercials.

Telephone Time with Frank Baxter, I think that was more like an interview type show.

Back to the Desert Inn again with Newcomers, from November eighteenth, we closed new years eve.

He got residuals from Zib, whatever that was, some kind of commercial.

Did the Jack Parr Show.

Garry Moore Show.

Donna Reed Show. It was a merry christmas show and everyone has always said how wonderful it was, what a great christmas show it was. He's a philanthropist who gives money for the annual christmas party at the childrens ward in the hospital, and Donna Reed talks him into playing Santa Claus. He seems to have done Santa Claus a lot, about three or four times.

Do you think that's maybe a reflection of how people in the business actually saw his personality?

I don't know, but this next one is the same thing, Santa Claus again, Sunday Showcase, After Hours. That was done in New York. I don't know why, it was made the seventh of February, and why he would be Santa Claus in February I have no idea, but he was. It was made out in Brooklyn, because I remember going to work with him one day out there.

When Comedy Was King was March twenty-ninth. Twentieth Century Fox. Oh, this is just something he was in.

Autumn 1958.

Do you look at your early films- have you seen them recently?

Every now and then I see one. Somebody else gets them; I don't have any prints of them any more.

Have you seen any of the work of Jacques Tati, the French pantomimist?

I've seen very little of it, only what's been on television.

How do you feel about him?

Well he's- I don't know what you'd call him. He's just out to be artistic.²⁶²

Well, of course I bring him up because he is the one person recently who has made a conscious effort to make comedies almost entirely without dialog. I wonder how you feel about making a sound comedy- whether they are silent comedies with music and sound effects added.

I wouldn't want to do that today. I still would look at it just the same as I looked at it when television first got a good hold and they put me out to doing half-hour shows.

Well, I said,

"Here's what I'm going to do. We go ahead and talk- put all the dialog in the first fifteen minutes- let 'em try for little laughs as we go- but for that second fifteen minutes deliberately go for places that just don't call for dialog." In other words, we don't go out of our way to avoid them, but it's just a natural thing that two people busy building something- there's no reason to talk, you just go ahead and build. Well, that's the type of material I looked for.

If you were making a feature at this time, what sort of film would it be?

I'd go back to my old format- that's the way I made 'em before. But I have no intentions of doing it. I just don't think it is worth while any more. I think in making a program picture today you're just asking for trouble. You can't get your money back. You've got to make an Around The World In Eighty Days, 'The King And I', you've got to get into one of those big things in order to get your money back. I'm anxious to see the day when television and the motion picture industry marry and set out a system, because it can't continue the way it is. I see only one solution to it. There should be paid television, and they could keep the costs so low that the poorest man in the world could have a television; they can keep the entertainment that low priced. And in that way you'd make pictures exactly the way they used to make them before television- I mean you'd think nothing of spending a million and a half for a program picture.

What kind of future do you think screen comedy has- what would you expect a really good screen comedy of the future would be like?

²⁶²[Don't worry Tati fans, by 1960 Buster has revised this opinion.]

There won't be any change. Everything seems to travel in cycles- it always did. Some fellow comes along like Jerry Lewis who gets all his laughs talking fast, screaming and making faces and things like that- and he is sure top box office for a while; I don't know but what he is still up there. Then along about this time when our back is turned, someone like W.C. Fields will come along- the funny character type of comic- and he'll be the rage- and you'll find nine more like him working. Then along will come another type and he'll be the rage for the next five or six years, and everybody will try to work like him.

Did you have imitators yourself?

Oh, yes.

Arthur B. Friedman. Buster Keaton: An Interview. The interview is part of what Keaton said when he and his wife spent an evening at Mr. Friedmans house, during which Buster correctly (and uniquely) identified a mysterious contraption the Friedmans kept in a corner as a noodle-slicer.

Studio procedures had to be more permissive in those days.

Well, they were a lot different than making motion pictures now. For instance, I was an independant outfit working in my own studio. My camera man, my technical man, the entire staff- they're under salary fifty-two weeks a year because I went for years- when I got into making feature-length pictures- of only making two a year. One for spring release and one for fall release. Well, it actually didn't make any difference to us when I put the camera up. We owned our own camera. We weren't renting it. We had all our own equipment, and so it was the thing, even after the picture was finished, I'm in the projection room looking at cut sequences put together, and maybe the cutter says

"That one is mistimed. Let's do that one over. Get those people back tomorrow." So that cost nothing. Well, today, if you did that in a motion picture, you'd wreck the company.

Think of it, having to get an okay to do a retake. It's like a painter having to get a permit to do a painting over. If I thought I was going to need a retake I'd just tell the actors not to shave their beards off until I'd looked at the rushes..... They have too many people on pictures now, you know. Too many cooks. We had a head electrician, a head carpenter, and a head blacksmith.

What do you think about the wide screen?

There's nothing wrong with cinemascope, but it hurts comedy. I want to work full figure. All comedians want their feet in. I like long takes, in long shot. Close-ups hurt comedy. I like to work full figure.

When Stanley Kramer telephoned me about playing a part in 'It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World' they came with the script, and it was as big as a telephone directory. We didn't write scripts. It was all in our heads.

Merton of the Movies.

They started out by renting some kind of film to be used in the second act, and it didn't make any sense at all, had nothing to do with Buster, or what we were doing, so we got my camera, I had my movie camera with me, my little sixteen millimeter camera, so we went out and made our own home movie with the slate

numbers on and everything because in the play they were supposed to be looking at the rushes.

1959

We worked at the Deauville Hotel in Miami Beach, from January twentythird to March third, Newcomers. It was a very big show for a couple of years. It was two youngsters that are going to the moon on their honeymoon, and they get in the rocket to the moon, and Billy Gilbert, he was the one that used to do all the funny sneezes, chubby guy that used to be in movies, doesn't matter, he's the one that sets them off to go to the moon, and instead of going to the moon forward in time, this is 1958 that this is all happening, they go backwards in time to 1928, and that's where they run into these big stars in 1928, Paul Whiteman was a big orchestra leader, Rudy Vallee was a big star singer, Harry Richman was a big star singer, Buster at that time was a big star movie star, and they all did their own thing and then at the end, they all got involved in doing the duel, Paul Whiteman was the second, and Harry Richman, anyway they all were in it, and then the show closed with Paul Whiteman conducting Rhapsody In Blue. It ran an hour and twenty minutes, because that's all Las Vegas allows, keeps people away from the tables if you let a show run too long, and they will not allow more than an hour and twenty, twenty-five minutes tops, prefer even less. Because the money comes on the crap table, not in the show room.

Buster loved it. We worked up there a lot of times. He and I both worked up there quite a lot, different hotels. They pay really good money up there, so why not take it?

Desi, of Lucille and Desi, one time when they were working up there, he hit it lucky and won thirty-five thousand dollars practically in one night. And he went straight home and bought a boat.

You see, because Buster's only vice appears to have been smoking, he tends to be portrayed as a saint, yet apart from that it seems impossible to find a vice except for the drinking period, which most people would understand completely...

He wasn't even much of a gambler, all the time we worked in Vegas, once in a while he'd go by a dollar slot machine and drop a dollar in.

When we were doing Newcomers of '28, one of those times we were at The Desert Inn, I know the date, it was March thirteenth which was Myra's birthday. And these friends of ours that we'd known for a million years that lived there, their daughter, Laverne, called first thing in the morning and says,

"Barbara Lee just had her baby on Myra's birthday." We all said,

"Yaaay! Fun." So anyway I had to go grocery shopping, whatever, and I got in the car and left. Buster says,

"I'm going to go get a haircut." We had an apartment there, so he walked across the street, and through the edge of the golfcourse and into the hotel to get his hair cut. And afterwards he went by the roulette table, and the dealer's standing there doing nothing, spinning the wheel, it was probably around noon, the place was semi-empty. So Buster stopped and bought chips. He starred the number thirteen, one on each corner and one in the center of the number thirteen, for the new baby and Myra's birthday. And he did that about three or four times, and it hit. So he pulled it off, and starred it again, because you have to take the win off, and it hit again. And then he played it one more time and it lost, so he got a little bag to put the chips in. When I got back, we had a desk, and a drawer about three, four inches deep and twelve or fourteen inches wide, and as deep as the desk, and it was full to the top with five dollar blue chips that he'd won. The

whole rest of the time we were there, they had what they called a Chuck Wagon, midnight lunch like a buffet, and we used to go every night, because we'd have a very light kind of dinner around five in the afternoon, and then we'd go there after the midnight show and do their buffet. We were there altogether about eight weeks, and I'd take one of those chips every night for my gambling, because I used to gamble while the midnight show was on, I didn't go over for the dinner show. And we'd take three or four every night for our midnight lunch. Each different hotel has their own thing, but I could take the Desert Inn chip and spend it at some other hotel, it was as good as money anywhere in the city. And we spent those chips the whole rest of the time we were there, we never spent cash for anything. And I don't really know how much money there was in that drawer because I never took it out and counted it, but we used it the whole trip. And he used to do that.

We used to travel to Europe by ship whenever we had time, before jets, and they have those little horse racing games, it's a great big long track of canvas that's marked, and they'd have horses about two feet high that the guys move along, and you pick out your numbered horse and bet on it, big gambling game; and bingo, on the ships. Every night they'd have something. I could sit and play all night every night and never win, ever, never win anything. And he didn't win a lot, but one time on every trip, he would hit big and win on something, enough to pay all our tips, stewards, bar tab, laundry, cleaning, pressing, everything like that, he would win enough to pay for everything on the trip. Always won something.

So after he'd done it a few times...

...You expect it. But as I say, I'd never win anything, to this day I don't win. But he wasn't a consistent winner, but he always had that one big splash. Kinda strange.

In early fifty-nine there was more North West Orient Airline commercials.
Shamrock Oil commercials.

U.S. Steel commercials.

This says W.L. Dist. America. I have no idea what that is.

Masquerade Party.

Huckleberry Finn, the movie. Once again he was the lion tamer, and he was working in the cage with the lion. He was very brave working with animals.

I had very little dialog. I just talked to my lion; Orville, his name was. That episode wasn't in the book, but the writers, I guess, wanted the scene where the two villains fell into the lion's cage. Tony Randall [the King] and Mickey Shaughnessy [the Duke], I think.

The Devil To Pay. Education research film for the National Association of Wholesalers. Private use only. 16mm.

Seven Up commercials.

U.S. Steel again.

Playhouse Ninety, again, another one.

Wade Advertising, that was probably a commercial.

Today the most exciting moments of my life come when I step out on my property and walk around it, accompanied by Elmer 111, [Junior] my amiable 180-pound St. Bernard. Sometimes Jenny, our cat, also comes along. There were nine walnut trees in

the garden when we bought the house, and I since have put in all sorts of fruit trees, including lemon, orange, tangerine, lime, plum, peach, apple, crab apple, and apricot. We grow three kinds of grapes- Tokay, Concord, and Thompson seedless- and also have raspberry and boysenberry bushes, and an artichoke bed. Each spring I grow radishes, cabbages, turnips, beefsteak tomatoes, and lettuce. I built a chicken yard in the rear of our land and a miniature railroad that carries peanuts, soda pop, sandwiches, popcorn to guests seated around a small garden house near the pool. For the accomodation of visiting grandchildren, nephews, movie producers, and TV sponsors we installed a bunkhouse.

If there's a better place in the world to be- when I'm not in front of an audience or a camera- someone else will have to name it.

Today my boy, Jimmy, is in charge of the still section of the publicity department at Twentieth Century-Fox. Bob wanted no part of the picture business. He and a war buddy ran a couple of garages for some years. They were great fellows for devising special bodies for custom-made cars and stuff like that. But Bob gave that up a short while ago to go into business in Reno.

These days when they come to see me they bring along their wives and their children. Jim has four of them: Jimmy thirteen, Mike eleven, Missy nine, and Marc three. Bob has two: Bobby eight, and Tommy three.

As I mentioned all six of my son's children call me Grandpa Buster.

With one thing and another I seem to have missed very little in not being a millionaire. I did miss it twice, now that I think about it again after a couple of hundred-odd pages. Once, of course, was because of my folly in not holding onto my screen properties.

But even before that, Roscoe Arbuckle, Al St. John and myself, all narrowly escaped becoming multi-millionaires overnight- thanks to a hardheaded businessman's logical thinking and shrewdness. The business associate was our studio manager, Lou Anger.

Anthony Simmons. Director: About attempt to make the Optimist (of Nine Elms) with Keaton: "Nobody in the U.K. wanted to know at all, and we approached United Artists and we got their backing from New York, if they could write it off against Europe. They couldn't guarantee a film with Keaton for 22,000 pounds on the U.K. market. It wasn't the script they were afraid of, it was Keaton they were afraid of, and I find that very sad." [The film was made with Peter Sellers.]

And today, my pet is making commercials, it's easy work for me, do 'em quick, and stay home here and enjoy life.



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE.

Thank you.

1960>62. Oscar. Comedians. Autobiography.

1960

I have completed 61 years. My first salaried week is in 1899. As this was written there were rumors that Charlie [Chaplin] would like to get back to America. I hope he makes it. Even more I hope he keeps his promise to start making pictures again.²⁶³

Officer Murphy, which was a pilot film in January of sixty. Probably didn't sell. If it doesn't sell you never hear of it again, they may put it on in the summer just as a filler, might get their money back that way. Jack Webb, after Dragnet, wanted to do another show, so Buster was.. I don't know if he did one, or if he just went in as a story consultant.

Jack Parr, a talk show, Buster was supposed to do it, and somebody didn't allow it, one of the networks, so I did it instead. It was N.B.C. He was probably going to be doing something for C.B.S. and they wouldn't allow him to appear on N.B.C., so I went and did it, because it was contracted for.

Masquerade Party in February.

N.B.C. Sunday Showcase. February seventh.

Jay Art Films? He did some kind of a movie.

Revlon Show with Paul Whiteman, March twenty-fourth.

Receives Oscar for his 'Unique talents which brought immortal comedies to the screen.'

Did he feel like he really deserved it?

Oh, I'm quite sure he did, because in essence it was for all the pictures he'd made. He certainly felt some of those films deserved it, and since he was responsible for them he deserved it himself.

The Oscar show was fun, April fifth, and that was the night he got his Oscar.

They set it up at The Hollywood Brown Derby, right across the street from the Pantages Theater where they did the Oscar Show. All the names like Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons, all the big name type people were there in the restaurant as guests, and they interviewed around from table to table; and they got Buster and Bob Cummings and a couple more to be the waiters, they dressed in the waiters uniforms and they waited on tables for all of this whole show, and that's how they got Buster to go, because Buster wouldn't go to the Oscar Show, what did he know from that? They said,

"Come and be a waiter, and thing and thing and we'll save you seats." So that way they conned him into going, and so they had exactly two minutes to get out of their waiter... they wore their dress shirts and bow ties and black pants, but they had to get these red jackets off, get their own dinner jacket on, and run a half a block across the street and into the theater, because once they lock those doors and the show goes on the air, that's it, you can't get in. So he and the others were all running like thieves (laughs) across the boulevard to get in before they slammed the door.

'Randall also sat down with [Jack] Lemmon, who was nominated for a best actor Award for his female impersonation in 'Some Like It Hot'. They began discussing the nature of comedy. As they did so Buster Keaton, standing by their table dressed as a waiter, did some pantomime that was comedy. Keaton was in and out of camera range throughout this half hour show at the Brown Derby and stole the show.

²⁶³[He didn't.]

[Films in Review. 'The Industry's Third Oscarcast', by N.C. Chambers. May 1960]

Then we sat through the whole show, and then went to the Beverly Hilton afterwards for the big party that they always have, and that's when we sat with Bob Hope and his wife at a big table of people, and Buster and Deforest an older man who invented the er... some kind of an important tube, rathion tube? or something. Anyway, he got his special award, and Buster got his Oscar at the dinner party, it wasn't on the air, but he was thrilled about that. Stood up there, crying, and all he ever managed to get out was, "Thank you." (laughs) That's all he said.

Another commercial for Wynn Power Tools.

R.C.A. Victor.

Once Upon A Mattress. We started rehearsal in July, opened August thirty-first. That went on for almost a year.

A Quiz Show I guess, Play Your Hunch.

After Hours, was a very good one hour show, on N.B.C. Showcase.

There's one he did early December where he was Santa Claus. He was a beautiful Santa Claus, the beard, the red suit and everything.

Because of the way I look on the stage and screen the public naturally assumed that I felt hopeless and unloved in my personal life. Nothing could be farther from the fact. As long back as I can remember I have considered myself a fabulously lucky man. From the beginning I was surrounded by interesting people who loved fun and knew how to create it. I've had few dull moments and not too many sad and defeated ones.

In saying this I am by no means overlooking the rough and rocky years I've lived through. But I was not brought up thinking life would be easy. I always expected to work hard for my money and to get nothing I did not earn. And the bad years, it seems to me, were so few that only a dyed-in-the-wool grouch who enjoys feeling sorry for himself would complain of them.

Does that sound right?

Sounds pretty good, as I say, he might have corrected his English and made better sounding sentences, but the sense of it is there.

As long as we're on the subject [of the high earnings of silent movies] I will break down and admit that I, like everyone else, would like to be a millionaire. Yet it also seems to me that I am a far happier man today than either Lloyd, who retired years ago, or Chaplin, who is in virtual exile.²⁶⁴

I never knew a real actor who was happy when he wasn't working. And working is something I manage to do a lot of these days, between appearing in night clubs, in summer theaters and European circuses, an occasional movie job, TV guest appearances and doing commercials for Alka-Seltzer, Northwest Orient Airlines, and other companies.

I like to think that I'm a man so devoted to acting that having a million bucks would not stop me. At the same time I wonder if I could have as much fun and satisfaction. Could I really work as hard as I do if I had more money than I could spend during the rest of my life?

It has been my observation that being a millionaire alters almost everybody's attitude, and can be as distracting as inheriting a zoo or a harem. The only millionaires I ever

²⁶⁴[This is, according to my understanding of various biographies and autobiographies, and other observers, strictly true.]

saw working in a circus were the folks who owned it. Millionaires, willingly or not, take on a certain dignity. Some of this may be due, of course, to the wistful way other people look at them. Getting very rich, shall we say, eliminates some of the incentive for taking pratfalls and clowning it up generally as I do every time I work.

In this also may lie a clue to why certain of today's comedians don't work any harder than they do. Some of them became millionaires awfully fast.

After writing all of this it occurs to me that I might be far less philosophical on this subject if I were broke. But if I'm no millionaire, I'm not poor either. I drive a Cadillac, have a beautiful home deep in the San Fernando Valley and a pretty wife, and there is nothing I want that I cannot buy. The fact is that I'm rapidly approaching the point where I'm making almost as much as when I was a \$3,000-a-week silent-movie star.

I'm still, thanks to our income tax laws, in no danger of becoming a millionaire. As George Gobel would say, 'they just don't hardly make those kind no more.'²⁶⁵

By now, of course, all sorts of laurels have been handed the slapstick comedies that Chaplin, Lloyd, Harry Langdon, and I made. They have been acclaimed as screen classics, masterpieces of the comic art.

This is most flattering, but it came as a complete surprise to me. I never realized I was doing anything but trying to make people laugh when I threw my custard pies and took pratfalls. Like anyone else I enjoy being called a genius. But I cannot take it seriously. Neither does Harold Lloyd, as far as I know. The only one of us who listened and accepted the role of genius intellectual critics thrust upon him was Chaplin. Sometimes I suspect that much of the trouble he's been in started the first time he read that he was a 'sublime satirist' and a first-rate artist. He believed every word of it and tried to live and think accordingly.

How do you feel about the comedians who have come up since sound?
Do you have any favorites among people like the Marx Brothers, Fields, and Red Skelton?

Skelton I like very much. Lou Costello I like very much.

Sound film people, he loved Lucille Ball, he loved Skelton, later on in television he was crazy about Jackie Gleason. The ones he liked did physical things, didn't just stand around and talk and tell jokes.

Did you like the Marx Brother's films?

Some of them- when they don't get too ridiculous.

Well, there you've got a good many verbal gags and sometimes-

That's Groucho.

The gags don't develop as they did in the silent comedies and as they certainly did in your films- where you get one gag and you keep thinking it is going to end, but it turns into something else.

Oh, yes, we deliberately tried to keep something rolling.

Laurel and Hardy we both loved. Roscoe of course, Mabel Normand.

Laurel and Hardy.. They did a two-reeler and the entire plot was not understanding a traffic officer...

[Buster demonstrates with delighted disbelief that when the officer beckons them forward, they think he wants to speak to them. They get out of the car to go and talk to him, and get sent back, ad infinitum..]

That's all there was to the plot, a two-reel picture. That's all they ever needed was something like that.

H.F. How would you account for the fact, though, that since the advent of talkies, with the probable exceptions of W.C.Fields, Mae West, and Laurel and Hardy, there have been no great comic stars that I can think of?

²⁶⁵[George Gobel, one of the biggest stars of TV in the 1950's. "You can't hardly get them no more."]

Well, my pet is Red Skelton. And I like Lou Costello too. Both of these boys would have done well in the silent days. I don't doubt that Jerry Lewis would have too. Jackie Gleason's another one that if he'd have been turned loose in the silent days, he would have come out all right.

F. Do you think any of these people have reached the stature- just to leave Buster Keaton aside- of Charlie Chaplin?

No. I classify Chaplin as the greatest motion picture comedian of all time.

Chaplin, he always said was the Dean of films, there was nobody could touch him.

F. What about a verbal comic? For instance Bob Hope, and I've read somewhere that you like Hope too. But do you think that Hope depends too much on dialog?

Why no! That's his style and his way of workin'. I don't like to see Hope in action. His body movements are not funny to me. He don't seem natural when he starts looking for laughs in action.

F. He does mug.

Oh, yes...

F. By body movements do you mean the entire body?

Yeah, I'll send W. C. Fields in there just to get me the telephone book and look up a number for me. For some reason or other, he'll just have trouble finding it. He'll get ten laughs where Hope won't get one.

Buster loved W.C.Fields, he was raised with him, they were both in Vaudeville together. Fields was the same age group as Buster's father, and they used to pal up together.

But I've always had my pets, but I have to go back through the field. My favorite clown was Marceline at the Hippodrome, and Slivers Oakley of the Barnum and Bailey show. And third choice, Poodles Hanneford. Now I go in for blackface comedians. My pet was Bert Williams, who was actually a colored man, but used to put burnt cork on, black up.... the same as Moran and Mack, or Lew Dockstader, Frank Tinney; we had some great blackface comedians. We have lost them completely.

F. I notice you left Al Jolson off your list.

Well, Al Jolson is an entertainer. Same as Eddie Cantor. I never classified Jolson as a comedian. He did comedy, but those other people who were in minstrel shows, they were character comedians. I go for the tramp comedians; one of our great monologists and a funny man was Nat Wills. W. C. Fields was a tramp. And you went for your light comedians like Raymond Hitchcock. That's a Bob Hope or a Jack Benny.

F. What about another favorite of yours whom we very rarely see nowadays, Lloyd Hamilton; what was his work like?

Well, Lloyd was one of the funniest men in silent pictures. He just looked like a big overgrown kid. That's all.

F. Like Harry Langdon, who looked like a big baby?

Well, Langdon was younger. Langdon worked like he was about six years old. Lloyd had grown up, but still was a kid.

Of course I do lose my pets: my German comedians, my Jewish comedians, and Italian.

F. How do you mean, 'You lose them'?

Well, you don't see them anymore. They're afraid to do it.

F. You mean because of social pressures from sensitive minority groups?

You get a good Joe Welch today, a Jewish comedian- half of Israel would turn over, see, objecting to it. You don't dare show a low Irish character. So those comedians are afraid of offending somebody, and they just haven't developed in the last, oh, I'll say, thirty-five years. [Since 1925]

F. Do you remember a character named Stepin Fetchit?

Very much.

F. Do you think Stepin Fetchit was funny?

Sure, he was a funny guy!

F. But, you can see why some Negro groups might object to him as a phony stereotype?

Oh, well, sure, because he plays a stupid.

F. That's it. And he might be used by some anti-negro groups to say this is what the negro is .

Well, that's the wrong way to look at it from the theatrical viewpoint, because you've got stupid people in every walk of life and in every country. Our American rube used to be a very funny character. And very witty, in the bargain. We've lost him. We don't have him anymore either.

F. Who would that be? Can you think of any...

Go back to Will M. Cressy, Eddie Buzzell, Judy Canova, and a few rube characters who were very funny. The nearest thing you've got to them today is the hillbilly who is lazy and sloppy, but that wasn't a rube.²⁶⁶

F. Was Bob Burns a rube character?

He was an Arkansas rube, almost the hillbilly, but he was a rube character like Chic Sale.

F. What about Will Rogers?

Will Rogers- out and out- well, he was a high class rube, an Okie. That's about all you can say. I don't know how else you can classify him.

F. Perhaps there's a category called Will Rogers.

Mr. Keaton, it has been said by many that the secret source of humor is not anything pleasant, but is pain or pathos, ... Freud called humor 'the loftiest of the defense motions';... Mark Twain says 'Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor itself is not joy, but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.'.... A lot of Yiddish humor has been explained by way of it's intrinsic sadness.... Now, in view of your own brand of dour, deadpan humor, Mr. Keaton, would you agree that human pain, not pleasure, is at the bottom of most successful humor?

Yes, I'm afraid I do to a certain extent, a great deal of it because an audience will laugh at things happening to you, and they certainly wouldn't laugh if it happened to them.

F. Do you think that there are other kinds of humor- that some humor is just plain good fun?

Oh, sure. Now, you go for another type of comedian and material. There is the Marx Brothers. There was no sense to anything they did. But pathos there had nothing to do with them. They never even got into a situation where you felt sorry for somebody.

F. Everybody else, but not them.

Course, they'd kid themselves in and out of everything. Same as the Ritz Brothers.

F. Very good at conmanship, that's right. What do you think of some other present-day comedians? What about ladies, say, Marilyn Monroe, or Lucille Ball?

Lucille Ball is my top. The greatest character comedienne, Marie Dressler. Light comedienne, Lucille Ball. I mean of all time, as far as I can remember. Nothing Lucille can't do.

F. What about Marilyn Monroe? Have you seen any of her films?

I saw 'Some Like It Hot' (1959). I liked the picture very, very much. It was awful hard to do what Billy Wilder did in that picture, directing it. Because the minute a man puts on women's clothes, you've got a farce comedy on your hands. It's awfully hard to tell a legitimate story, and he darned near did it with that picture. Darned near!

F. Don't you think a lot of the impact of that picture comes from the fact that George Raft and Pat O'Brien and Joe E. Brown are all in it playing themselves... and to perfection.

Sure thing. I loved Joe E. Brown in it.

²⁶⁶[Rube. U.S. An unsophisticated countryperson.]

F. What about Jack Lemmon? Does he have the potential to be a great comic?

I think he has. You get the certain types of material that you can put him in; he's a light comedian. You don't call him a character comedian, or a low comedian such as I am.

F. I wouldn't say you were a low comedian.

Well, no, when you say a low comedian it is a character comedian.

F. Do you think he's spasmodic; does Lemmon move too much?

No. I think he did a great job with *Some Like It Hot*.

F. What did you think of Marilyn Monroe's performance?

Well, it was great in that picture.

F. What about some of the British comedians?

Oh, I've got one pet over there. Richard Hearne, Mr. Pastry. He's been on the Ed Sullivan Show a dozen times. He's a young fellow that makes up as an old man, and he does a routine where he's supposed to be at a dance, and he dances with imaginary characters. And he does another one where they initiate him into a drinking club of some kind or other, where they jump up on chairs and take a drink between every jump. He's a character comedian.

F. What about a Frenchman, Jacques Tati- He's a mime. He doesn't talk.

Oh yes. I like him. Very, very much.

F. Did you observe the work of, say, Jean-Louis Barrault, the mime, or Marcel Marceau, The French mime.

No.

F. What about the French comedians besides Tati? Do any of them appeal to you?

Very much. I like him. I like the clown.

F. What about Fernandel, say, the guy who looks like a horse?

Oh, he's a great character!²⁶⁷

F. What about the idea of a one man show? Have you ever thought of putting on your own?

I been asked to. But I turned it down. I could probably dig up the material and the sets, but- too hard a work. I work too hard when I start doing those things.

F. I wonder, what do you think of the possibilities of television as a medium. Rossellini and Jean Renoir, the Italian and French directors, have suggested that perhaps TV is the coming medium because production isn't too expensive, and that therefore there can be experiments on television. Do you agree?

That's what he said? That they weren't expensive?

F. Well, a television show is less expensive than making a feature picture, anyway.

Yes, that's true

F. And of course, they're talking about Italy and France where maybe-

Yeah, I know.

F. Well, do you think TV is too expensive?

TV hasn't reached anywhere near the proportions it is in the United States- nowhere in Europe. Their sets are beautiful, and the French have the number one, the best television. I believe we have, what is it, five hundred lines in our picture? There's seven fifty in the French. They got a much finer grain picture on their screen than we do....

F. What about your own experiences in doing shows specifically for TV?

I like to work in TV, but I like the live audience. I don't like to do anything on film for television.

F. That's unusual. It's very often the reverse. Many artists feel that they may make mistakes on a live show, mistakes without the chance for retakes.

No, because the minute I see something that was done to a silent camera then it looks like something that was done thirty years ago. But the minute you've got an

²⁶⁷[Fernandel. A comic legend in France, he made over a hundred films.]

audience's reaction right along with the work- I don't mean canned laughs. They are poison to me. I hate to watch anything that's got canned laughs to it.

F. Do you ever change your style? Suppose you feel you're not getting a response from the audience and you are doing a live TV show, will you alter your routine on the spot?

As a rule I automatically speed up until I start getting laughs some place. Then I slow down again. And another thing I found too.. The biggest thing any comedian has got in television is diggin' up material. I'll give you an idea; it's that I used to make eight two-reelers a year. Well, a two-reeler was a half-hour show. Well, now when television comes along, they want thirty-nine of those a year. Well, there's only one way you can get material. I mean just hiring writers and gag men don't solve the problem. You've just got to start repeating, and stealing. Any things you can think of. Like,

"Well, we did that three or four weeks ago in a drug store; the next time we'll do it in a butcher shop. And we change the backgrounds for gags, or steal gags right and left!"

F. That's death to an original comedian. Harry Langdon repeated himself to a quick end.

He always felt it was very sad.. Harry Langdon for instance, all his early films were controlled by whoever [Sennett and Capra] anyway, he was fine until he started getting too many good reviews, and then he got a swelled head about it, and I guess his contract ran out and instead of re-signing he took over running his own career, and he ran it right down to nothing, because he wasn't smart enough to do what he thought he could do. Buster thought that was terribly sad because he could have stayed a big star a much much longer time if he hadn't tried to run his own career himself.

I don't know how Red Skelton manages to do TV at all. It's the quickest way to Forest Lawn that I know of. Trying to dig up material for that weekly show. The first few are easy. Then it starts to get tough!

P.G. Why don't there seem to be any great women clowns apart from Beatrice Lillie?

I think it's because actresses try too hard and want to be liked.

In our day, there was tremendous competition in our field. Today there is none. Jerry Lewis remains on top.... but Jerry doesn't have Chaplin, Lloyd, Hamilton (Lloyd Hamilton), and a half a dozen others on his heels... with Laurel and Hardy coming on apace to reach truly great heights.

If our comedy is acceptable today, if the critics rave and the fan letters come in, I think it can be taken for granted that we contributed to something more than early movies. The laughter of the world?

Publication of autobiography. My Wonderful World of Slapstick.²⁶⁸

Now, in closing, I try to think of a few of the thrills of my lifetime which I have not mentioned here.

Where I get a great feeling is that now, twenty-five years after I've made my last important picture, I am still recognized and given special privileges wherever I go. This is particularly true in Europe. When I check in at the Ritz or the George V or the Savoy, the clerk will give me the best room available just because I'm Buster Keaton.

²⁶⁸[Review of 'My Wonderful World of slapstick' from 'Films In Review', V.11. No.8. Pgs. 500-2. William K. Everson: 'The title of Buster Keaton's autobiography suggests its shortcomings. 'Slapstick' is too superficial and inadequate a word for the wonderful and individualized visual humor created by Keaton.'][As it mainly complains of exactly the gaps that this book has filled, I won't bother you with the rest.]

I've never had to tip a headwaiter to get a good table anywhere. I don't have to be announced in the leading cafes of Europe.

Now even a beloved businessman, a millionaire many times over, like Joe Schenck gets no recognition. He has to tip the room clerk and the headwaiter lavishly to get the best in the house.

I think I have had the happiest and luckiest of lives. Maybe this is because I never expected as much as I got. What I expected was hard knocks. I always expected to have to work hard. Maybe harder than other people because of my lack of education. And when the knocks came I felt it was no surprise. I had always known life was like that, full of uppercuts for the deserving and the undeserving alike.

But it would be ridiculous of me to complain. I find it impossible to feel sorry for myself. I count the years of defeat and grief and disappointment, and their percentage is so minute that it continually surprises and delights me.

When Jose Greco said my name in Spanish meant 'A little bit of nothing', I said, "A little bit of nothing! Not even a little bit of something?" he replied, "That's the finest compliment my countrymen could pay you."

And I do think he's right.

Not long ago a friend asked me what was the greatest pleasure I got from spending my whole life as an actor. There have been so many that I had to think about that for a moment. Then I said,

"Like everyone else, I like to be with a happy crowd."

And that is a comedian's greatest privilege and pleasure, I think: to have been with so many happy crowds whom he has made laugh with his pratfalls and other clowning antics.

I was recognized and hailed when things were going great for me and also in the years when I began to think I was forgotten. There was a day in 1950 when we arrived in Genoa where Eleanor and I were to start a twelve-week musical-comedy tour in Italian theaters.

I was standing on the deck looking down at a gang of stevedores working on the dock thirty feet below. One of them recognized me, nudged his neighbor, and pointed. All at once the whole gang stopped working to yell, "Booster! Booster Keaton!" They waved in wild excitement, and I waved back, marveling, because it was fifteen years or more since they could have seen my last M-G-M picture.

And if there's sweeter music this side of heaven I haven't heard it. Dr. Avedon said I could live to be a hundred years old. I intend to do it. For who would not wish to live a hundred years in a world where there are so many people who remember with gratitude and affection a little man with a frozen face who made them laugh a bit, long years ago when they and I were both young?

1961

Sixty-One. January first through March eighteenth, was **Once Upon A Mattress**. It's the story of the princess and the pea, a fairy story, and Buster was the King, and Dodie Goodman was the Princess, Princess Fred. It was a real cute musical, good music, good lyrics, good cast, good everything. There wasn't a commercial tune in the thing, nothing that you could go buy in a store or sing or play a record, it was good, but not pop music.
He did Candid Camera.

Alan Funt: "The first thing he said was that,
"I can do some funny things while I'm having breakfast."
and I said,

"Well, that's wonderful, do you need any props?" He said,
"No, nothing, zero."

I said,
"Well, why don't you try it once, and I'll get an idea what it looks like." We rolled that camera. One gag right after another, and one take! One take and that was all. He's truly a genius.
Of course, Buster adored it. There he was, working not onstage but it was a practical joke, and y'know he loved practical jokes, and that's the way he considered it."

They re-ran After Hours.

He got a very large check from Italy, I guess one of the books was translated into Italian.

Then he went to the bus and truck company, you see our company of Once Upon A Mattress was the national company, and we stayed a month, and six weeks, everywhere we went, but they also put out a bus and truck company, that does half a week, half a week, and instead of taking trains and unpacking and staying they go on a bus and they only stay two or three days in each place, and it is hard, hard work. Edward Everett Horton was doing the King in bus and truck and he had a chance to go do a film with Frank Capra. [Arsenic And Old Lace] We had finished and gone home, been home about a week, and he said, "Would you come and take my place? So I can go do this Capra movie. We only have one week stop, and then go into Washington D.C. for eight weeks, so you wouldn't be doing all that travelling." He looked at me and I looked at him, and he says,

"All right." So we went and we did a week somewhere in Ohio and then went into Washington D.C. and finished Edward Everett Horton's tour, and that took from May twelfth to probably the twenty-seventh of April or May.

Westinghouse Broadcast in July.

Marlboro Cigarette commercial in July.

July twentieth, Phillips 66, that's gasoline.

July thirty-first we did another two weeks of Once Upon A Mattress in New York, up by Niagara Falls. Tonawanda is the name of the town, it's an Indian name, Melody Fair was the theater.

He did Twilight Zone September sixth. Oh, a wonderful one... he did two but one was great. This was comedy, time-warp. Somebody invented a time machine, I don't think it was him, I think it was the other feller. He's in the middle of the street, like we'd say the middle nineteen twenties, with trolley cars and old automobiles, and somehow he has a chicken, I don't know whether he chased the chicken into the street, but anyway he picks up this chicken and as somebody throws a switch or something, he goes through this time-warp, And he and the chicken wind up in modern times, or they start modern and go back, it's been a long time since I've seen it, but anyway that's the premise of the thing. And I think eventually he gets back to his own time zone. Anyway. I think he did two of those.

He did a March of Dimes Show, did you see that picture in the hall of he and Ed Wynn peeking out from under a manhole cover in the street? That was that show at the end of 1961. It was for money to kill polio, which they did, they opened hospitals, they did everything from The March of Dimes, once a year, and children would go round collecting dimes house to house, they put on shows, they did everything, and this was a film to show in the theaters, and the ushers would go up and down with the canisters to pick up dimes. That's your little silver coin, ten cents, nowadays they're not silver, you can see the copper in there can't you? But they used to be silver. Nothing is real anymore.

Can I quote you on that?

That's quite right, everything is made to self-destruct.

But it was kind of cute.

History of Motion Pictures, The Sad Clowns. That was something that Paul Killiam put together from the Museum of Modern Art. Chaplin, Keaton, Langdon, compilation of clips.

1962

Sixty-two, this one was bad, Screen Gems made 'The Medicine Man' in January of sixty-two, and it was a pilot, he and Ernie Kovacs were going to make a series out of it. And they got right down to the last day of shooting, like on a Friday, and Ernie Kovacs went out to some big do at a hotel in Beverly Hills, got drunk and hit a telephone pole and killed himself. He was a wonderful, wonderful comic.

Something on The Canadian Broadcast Company on March eighteenth.

American Canadian Production, March ninth to April thirteenth, that was that Ten Girls Ago that was never finished. I don't know much about it because I didn't go to the studio that much, it was just that they ran out of money, and the actors union had no control over it because it was Canada, and Buster and Bert Lahr and Eddie Foy, none of them got paid. The Canadian people in the cast got paid, they had a Canadian union.

Did a show in Chicago. It was some kind of a lengthy benefit kind of thing for the Opera House or something, they were refurbishing or something. That was May 17, 18, and 19. He got paid for it, but basically it was a benefit.

Candid Camera May twenty-eight. One of them was wonderful. The other was all right but not great. [See Alan Funt above.] He did another one where he was pumping gas, and cleaning windshields, he had the uniform on with the hat and the whole thing, and what he did was he had a paper towel with a glob of dirt on it, so when he started cleaning the windshield he made it twice as bad, and the people in the car would yell at him to stop it, but he needed someone really nasty to make it work, and he only found one man that was half-way nasty, so it really wasn't that funny.

June sixteenth he did Route 66 which is a great show. It's called Journey to Nineveh. Route 66 goes from Santa Monica beach, all the way through to St. Louis, I think that's where it ends but I'm not sure. And all these shows took place with them driving in their convertible along Route 66. It was two or three years worth of shows, I think. It was a series that was on for two or three years about these two young men that went all over the place in a roadster, got involved in various things. Buster and Joe E. Brown were in this one and it was very good. I don't remember what it was about.

Mr Smith Thank Nick. It was a thirty minute TV show. He discovers how to breed mink faster by special breeding.

Here's another Candid Camera in August.

And a razor commercial in August. That was Rilly-Shave for Canada, I remember because we made it up in the desert and it was a hundred and twenty degrees up there. The only thing I can really remember, he was out in the desert, and he plugged his razor into a cactus and shaved, some silly thing.

He did a lot of Ford commercials, here is the first one, probably September.

And Something called Mr. Smith Goes To Washington. That wasn't the Jimmy Stewart film, a different thing altogether.

December tenth, The Triumph of Lester Snapwell. Eastman Kodak. 1962.

(Industrial film.) We did that one in Rochester, New York, the Eastman Kodak place was there. They used to make a short film every year bring out and promote and show the new cameras when they were invented. Nobody was allowed to see it. Everything was done under lock and key, only the people that worked there, that were actually making the film, could go in, and they were sworn to silence, so the word wouldn't get out, because these things were made like almost a year ahead. And the Japanese would have the camera on the market in twenty minutes, before they could, so everything had to be hush-hush. I wasn't even allowed to see it when I went over there one day and had lunch. I never saw it. I think it was the Kodak version of the instant camera, I think they had their version of polaroid, and polaroid sued them and they had to take it off the market, they weren't allowed to use it.

Oh. So they wouldn't be very pleased to show that movie again?

No.

The Today Show. The Today Show goes from seven to nine every morning, five days a week on N.B.C. Still does, has for years. Buster went over one day, he was the only guest and they showed film clips and talked for the whole two hours. I never saw it, I (laughs) slept through the whole thing.

Wasn't Buster a bit offended that you slept through it all?

No. I'd heard everything he had to say, and I'd probably seen all the film they'd collected. It wasn't like I was going to sit there and be surprised.



CHAPTER FORTY.

"Are you ready? Okay, let's go."

1962>64. Europe. Film. Railrodder.

January seven, Hotel Paradiso. That was Angie Dickinson. It was a tropical background setting and it was central America type where they didn't have extradition. So all these white-collar crooks went down there and lived like kings and they couldn't be extradited from there, they didn't have those kind of laws. Buster wasn't a crook, but he may have had something to do with running the hotel, or I don't know what.

Another Eastman Kodak commercial.

Louise Brooks: 'Since childhood I have thought Buster Keaton's the most beautiful face of any man I have ever seen, and finally in 1962 I got an opportunity to tell him so. We were in his Sheraton Hotel suite in Rochester during the time he was making a commercial film for Kodak. I was speaking of a shot of him hiding under a table in 'The General':

"You were so terribly beautiful in its tragic lighting, Buster, so out of key with your comic character- I can't understand why you didn't cut that shot out of the picture."

I don't think Buster ever gave a thought one way or another to his looks, considered himself ugly, handsome, or anything else. He was never self-aware.

Louise Brooks: 'Although the tragic prophecy of that close-up was now visibly chiseled upon the purity of his face, he had evidently never considered people's reactions to its beauty. For an instant his expression was mystifyingly shaken up like a snowstorm in a crystal paperweight, and then, dismissing the whole damned thing, with his little-boy walk he trudged into the kitchenette to get himself a cold beer.'

Sound likely?

Well, obviously, she came to say 'Hi!' at the hotel when we were there, but I don't remember her. It might have been just like to talk a minute in the lobby of the hotel, or maybe came to the studio where he was working because she knew he was there. But I don't remember any long-winded visit or discussion, so I can't tell you.

Raymond Rohauer: "I never noticed Buster Keaton to have an ego, he just felt that the public wasn't interested in himself, any more, and he couldn't understand why I was interested in saving the films."

Would that be correct?

Well, the point in not understanding why, he couldn't figure out why Raymond thought he could make money showing them or anybody else would be interested. He knew that Raymond as a person, as a collector would probably be interested, but he couldn't imagine anyone else being.

But he'd been to a showing of *The General*, and there must have been an audience there....

Yeah. But of course, in a way *The General* is a different thing, because it's unique. It was the best film he ever made, and the most unique film he ever made; and the most likely to be appreciated. So when you speak of *The General* and then you speak of some other Keaton picture, he wouldn't figure it would be in the same... Buster never thought *Seven Chances* was any good at all, he hated it, and it turned out to be one of the most popular ones there was later on, like now, when it's shown.²⁶⁹ *The General* was not the most respected film in *that* day, but it is now. It's respected as being the best now. I like *The General* the

²⁶⁹[Buster's whole attitude to *Seven Chances* seems to have been colored by having the story foisted upon him, and he never seems to have realized what a fine film he made of it, finally.]

best, and Buster did too because it was *his* picture that he did everything himself, wrote, directed, and all of that.

European Tour of movies.

Raymond Rohauer: "And 'The General' was selected by Buster himself as the film, because he felt that for many reasons, if the public was going to accept him at all they would accept him in that film. And he was so right.

Buster loved anything that was mechanical, in planning the tour, he was a part of planning it, and the fact that we brought this engine, it was an old engine from Vienna, and suddenly he becomes fired up with the idea that he could throttle the train himself into each train station, because we had a tour of 20 German cities."

The trainmen were the ones that'd go into shock when Buster'd get on the train.

He'd say

"Are you ready? Okay, let's go."

And they're going

"Aaargh!" Y'know, he's driving our train, he's going to crash our train.

Munich. (first show)

Raymond Rohauer: "We could hear the laughter of the people out in the street, and Buster said,

"What are they laughing at?" I said,

"At your picture." (laughs) He couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe that this is the reaction of the people. So I said

"Well let's go over and see it." He said,

"Oh no! I don't want to go into the theater, I never go in to see my own films with an audience, never."

And she said,

"He's right, he won't do it." She said, "Ray, you can talk all day, he won't do it."

So I said,

"Eleanor, why don't you and I go over?" and Buster said,

"All right, I'll wait for you."

So we had reserved seats in the balcony and the two of us went charging up the stairs to see what was causing all the riot, and it was 'Cops', they were running Cops ahead of The General, and I never heard such yelling in my life, couldn't believe it. They just loved every inch of it.

Raymond Rohauer: "And then when we walked back to Buster, and Eleanor was all enthusiastic now, she says

"Oh Buster, it's hard to believe they're really laughing at you, at your comedy, you."

He says

"Oh."

He didn't say anything, just listened, and we went back to the hotel. So I said to him that same day,

"Did you ever believe you'd see your name on a marquee as a star like that again?" He said,

"No, I never thought it would happen."

Does the public interest in Buster leave you cold?

No, I think it's building up all the time, and I think it's quite wonderful. It's more than he expected. When the films started showing again he had no idea that they would be that well received.

I ought to do something about the new release print of *The General* that was shown in London. When the film was to be revived in Europe we brought over as many old prints as we could find, in order to pick out the best reels- to find the ones that hadn't faded, or been chewed up by the machine. We gave them to the outfit in Munich who were handling the film, and they made a duped negative. They did a beautiful job of it. The first thing they wanted to do, as an experiment, was to translate all the English titles into German so that they could release the film in Germany. It did a beautiful business there, so immediately they made some more prints with French titles for release in France. Now they must have lost the list of English titles, so they put them back again into English from their own German translation.

I happened to see a print of this new English version in Rome last week- the same version you had in London- and the titles are misleading. For instance, when I'm trying to enlist and I'm asked 'what is your occupation?' I say 'bartender'. Well, that type of man gets drafted into the army immediately. In the new version the title reads 'barkeep'- that means you own the place. And it doesn't sound as funny anyway in English: it might in German, I don't know. Then they put 'sir' on the ends of sentences because I'm talking to an officer, but there's no 'sirring' at all in our titles. Some of our explanatory titles were changed or dropped as well. Do you remember for instance, the scene where we all get off the train and while we were away the engine was stolen? We actually stopped off there for lunch: the conductor comes into the car and says 'This is Marietta: one hour for lunch.' But they left that title off, and without it you'd think the train had emptied out because it was the end of the run. In which case there's no reason to steal the engine then: they could have waited until everyone had gone and the place was deserted.

1963

Another Ford commercial in July.

From August the third until October fifth we did the big state fairs, or Buster did, I wasn't working with him on that one. That's those things where they win prizes for canned peaches, and they have carnival and animal shows, and the children have the four H, where they win prizes for the best sheep or the best goat, that kind of thing. They have a big stage show in the horse racing thing, the audience sits in the grandstand and they put the big stage up right alongside of the track and they have a show. He and the Smothers Brothers, they were the two co-stars of the thing.

He did a beer commercial in Buffalo, New York.

Minute Rub commercial in New York. That's a medicated thing you rub on for aches and pains.

Some kind of a bread commercial in Minnesota, August twenty-sixth.

This one I'll always remember, did a benefit at the Shrine Auditorium, November seventeen to the twenty-first, in Peoria, Illinois. And as we're checking out of the Hotel to get a cab to go to the airport, Jack Kennedy was shot, and all the people in the hotel were hanging around a portable radio, including us. We saw it on a TV before we came downstairs. So while we're paying our bill and leaving the hotel and going to the airport, we know he's been shot, but that's all we know, no details. It was only a twenty minute hop down to, I think St. Louis, or someplace where we got a good plane, a big plane, this was just a little puddle-jumper, we got on the big plane, and St Louis Airport, big, big airport was just

silent, nobody said anything, everybody was doing what they had to do, making the plane or whatever. Nobody talked, nobody did anything, just total quiet. We were standing in line waiting to get on the plane, and she was right in front of me, big, heavy, fat woman, and she said, something, the exact words I don't remember, something to the effect,...

"I've always hated those Kennedys, it couldn't have happened to a nicer person." And I hit her right in the middle of the back and almost knocked her down. And she shut up, she never said anything more. She didn't even turn around to see who hit her. I think she realised she should not have opened her mouth, and if she turned around she might have got hit in the face. And after we got on the plane and got in the air then the pilot came on and said that he was dead. Boy, I'll never forget that. Ever. Everybody was stunned.

Buster did an Ed Sullivan after doing so many in... he did three or four in 1950-'51, then he didn't do any more until here's 1963, he did one in December. It's a big, like a vaudeville show, every Sunday night at eight, for years and years and years. Every big name in the business was on that show. He had ballet, comics, singers, musicians, because all he did was announce them, he didn't perform, he was a newspaper columnist, so he had no performance ability at all. Minute Rub commercials.

The seventh of November '63 was Mad Mad Mad Mad World. Everybody in the world. And the sad part of that was, when the film originally came out, Buster was one of the last people in the film out of all these names, and he ran the dock and the boat launching place where Spencer Tracy, he's the police chief that robs all this money and is going to escape, and Buster runs the dock where he's got his boat. And Spencer Tracy comes flying in there trying to get away from all these characters that are chasing him, to get his boat, to get away. And they had quite a long scene where they talked and did this and that, and it played in the theaters originally that way, Tracy of course took off and all this mob of people went flying by Buster while he's standing there saying, "Wha' happened?" It was quite a long scene that they had together. When it got around to second run theaters and television, they chopped chunks out to shorten it, and almost all of what Buster and Spencer Tracy did was chopped out except the very vital pieces of business that they had to do.²⁷⁰

They did the whole thing down at Malibu Beach, and a limo would come and pick him up every day for a week, so it certainly wasn't just a bit. We saw it, we went to the premiere, and it was a long scene. But as I say, they cut a lot of stuff out, they shortened scenes for everybody all the way through the film. It ran a long time, the premiere was up close to three hours or something, and they edited, edited, edited, and chopped down non-essential stuff, and got it down to where it could run in a regular theater, and TV later. You can buy the film, it's on videotape, but it's the short version, it's not the full one.

Penelope Gilliatt: He figures his talkiest scene was the telephone conversation with Spencer Tracy in Mad, Mad World. He doesn't know about Sunset Boulevard. He never saw it.

²⁷⁰[In fact, in both the modern prints I've seen, Buster is as close to invisible as makes no difference.]

It'd be wonderful to find that again, because those things were not necessarily great pictures, but they're an absolute encyclopaedia of people that were in pictures. Everybody you ever knew was in it.

It's the same with that *Forever And A Day*, every English actor that was in California was in that film, plus a lot of American actors, and for that reason alone it's worth having. It's like a quiz game, 'Oh, who's that? Who's that? I remember... what's his name?' you'd do that all through the film. And this is the same thing nowadays, because half of them are gone, y'know.

Sound of Laughter, it's a compilation with Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Danny Kaye and Buster.

Greatest Show On Earth. Jack Palance had a series, and he was the boss and ringmaster of a circus, Buster did one of those. They were an hour show. As I remember it was a pretty good show. Joan Blondell was in it, not too long before she died, and she was a doll, a real doll.

That was a very big smile for Joan Blondell...

She was a nice lady.

Burkes Law. Was a one hour show, a murder mystery, detective type thing that Buster did. He's one of the suspects in a case of a rigged elevator accident.

Professionally, I'm about as old as they come. Older than Chevallier, Ed Wynn, Francis X. Bushman. I've been acting for sixty-four years. I was playing in Tony Pastor's Theater, on East Fourteenth Street, before the twentieth century began. Right now, *The General* is playing all over Europe, and people are laughing harder at it today than they did in 1927, when it came out. [27, April. 1963.]

Premiere of *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. Buster wishes to go...

"We have aisle seats."

"You're not well." E.K.

"I can take my cough mixture, I can take a small container. I can get ready to move in a hurry." B.K. (Dardis.)

When was *Mad Mad World*?

Sixty three.

Sixty three? well, there was nothing the matter with him then.

Did you go to the premiere?

Yeah..It was fun. We had a good time. I was dying of a head cold if the truth be known. My head felt like it was eight sizes too big.

So this is Dardis playing fast and loose with the truth again?

Uhuh. It's one of the times we stood out in the lobby ahead of time and talked to Hedda Hopper for a while. Because she looked at me (laughs) and she says,

"What's the matter with you?" and I said,

"I've got a head cold I may die from, or wish I would die from." She says,

"You look it."

1964

Oh, this was fun. He went to Detroit to talk to them for a week in March, for the *Ice Capades*, which was one of the big ice shows of its day, and he wrote and staged the comedy material for all the comics in the show. This was in March when he went back, but they actually did the rehearsals from the middle of April till the first of May he rehearsed with the comics because they closed in L.A. on the first of May, they closed for the summer vacation, and then they opened again in Atlantic City in September or something. In the meantime they had all their new numbers staged, new costumes made, acts that were not going to go on

the following year were through and new ones hired, and he did all the rehearsals here, at the Sports Arena in L.A., before they went on the summer vacation, and that was April/May. That was fun to do, he enjoyed it, the comics had a ball working with him, and I went a couple of days and watched. He was staging things for them, there's a lot of things that he could do, you know, they get tired trying to dream up their own material, and there's a lot of things that Buster could have done for them, because they all moved well, but there's a lot of things you can't do on skates, so they had to do things that could be done on skates. Here's some show he did at Desilu studios on March twentieth.

A Lucille Ball Show?

It wouldn't be Lucille's show, no. He never did one of her shows.

Why Not?

I don't know, they never hired him. We were good friends but they never hired him.

Burke's Law was an hour show that he did March thirty-first.

Another Minute Rub. Lord have mercy here.

Ice Capades rehearsals.

Hollywood Palace. It was one that Johnny Carson was in before Johnny was on the Tonight Show.

That could have been the one with Gloria Swanson, Sunset Boulevard, that was the name of the show, it could have been that show with her, June first. But I'm not sure.

Sixth of June, '64 was the Hollywood Palace that Gloria Swanson did the sketch. A spoof of Cleopatra.

Then he did another set of Ford commercials. He did five or six every year for quite a few years, and they were all for the Ford Econoline Vans. The two that I remember the most.... he pulls into this big football field, and he pulls in with the van and he gets out and he starts unloading chairs and setting them up, then they go to whatever, voiceovers or something, and they come back and this field is full of folding chairs, in other words he's unpacked and set up all of them for some event, and he says,

"Phew!" wipes his forehead and he sits down and tips over backwards, and they start to go, and that entire field of chairs went over from just him sitting down and leaning back, they were that perfectly balanced. They got that in one take. It was his joke, and they had to balance them in such a way that they just were barely holding, and of course they had like eight or ten at a time anchored together in a row, they put a slat of wood across the back so that when he went the whole row would go and start the domino effect. On the screen it looks like twice as many as they really used, but there had to be two or three hundred at least.

Whose idea was that?

Oh, his. He wrote all of 'em. They'd just say,

"We got five to do, we have a background here, we can do it in a football field, we can do it up in the mountains..." Y'know, where they wanted to show off the vans, driving them.

The other one was done right down here just a little ways, in a residential neighbourhood. He pulls up in the van, he gets out and he goes down the driveway, and he came back with a full grown lion on a lead and a collar. Clarence, no it was Major; but he walked him down the driveway, and chunked him into the van and kicked him in the butt, and climbed up after him and shut

the doors, and the last thing you see of him is, Major's looking out one window, he's looking out the other as the truck drives away.

Did you ever hear of Clarence the Cross-Eyed Lion? He had a series, Daktari series? Anyway, Major did all his work for him because Clarence really was so cross-eyed he couldn't see to do anything, you get him to jump out of the back of a truck, he'd fall, he couldn't see. And Nicky Hargitay that was married to Jayne Mansfield, anyway his brother was Major's trainer, and he used to take the children and put 'em on Major's back and ride him from the set back over to his truck, where he stayed in his crate until they needed him again. So kids could ride him, he was that tame. And he told Buster, he says,

"Now, the only thing you have to worry about with this cat, you'll never have a problem in the world, just do not let him step on your foot, because he has five hundred pound pressure in his foot and he will break every bone in yours, if you ever let him step on you." So Buster had to just be careful to keep him out a way so he wouldn't step on him. That kind of thing, but he used to do about four or five every year, that they'd show at different times when they were presenting the truck.

And as a general rule was Buster allowed to write most of the commercials?

Well, if they had an idea for them, Buster would explore and change this or add that or whatever. Basically he was writing them with their help. One of the writer fellows would come out the house and they'd sit for a day, and figure out what they wanted to do. All of these commercials, he always wrote most of them. J. Walter Thomson. That's tobacco. Maybe he did a cigarette commercial, I don't know.

July eighteenth it says Art Picture. I bet that was Film.

'FILM'

Dir Alan Schneider. Written by Samuel Beckett.

Well, you know what Buster said to him, because he made 'Film' for Beckett, in New York, and Buster never knew what that was about either. He just showed up, wore the clothes they gave him and did what he was told, because it certainly wasn't comedy. And they were up at the hotel two or three times, Alan Schneider the director, and Beckett, and they were sitting there one day talking about this and that and the other thing. So he was talking and kidding with him, and Buster turned to Beckett and he says,

"Do you eat Welsh rarebit a lot at night before you go to sleep?" and Beckett says,

"No." absolutely no sense of humor of course. Buster said,

"Well, I just wondered." I was sitting there and I had to leave the room.(laughs)

...that was a wild daydream he had. Heck, I'd be the last one in the world to comment, because I didn't know what those guys were doing half the time. The director, Alan Schneider, just told me to keep my back to the camera and be natural. Just try acting natural with a camera crew aiming at your back. And as for Samuel Beckett, I took one look at his script and asked him if he ate Welsh rarebit before he went to bed at night.

On being read 'On Directing Film.' by Alan Schneider. Eleanor interrupts at the point where Schneider describes Buster meeting with

Beckett, and they can't get a conversation going because Buster is ignoring them...

I'm sorry, but I don't think that ever happened. The point is Buster would never do that. The whole thing's fiction, so there's no use talking about it. If Buster left the television ball game going after they arrived, it would have been with the sound turned off and just the casual glance to see what was happening, and he would not have *ever* been rude enough to ignore them, especially since he knew Beckett's reputation, and even Schneider, because Alan Schneider was a friend of Jimmy Karen and his wife that were in the beginning of the film, he was a friend of theirs and we had heard about him before he ever turned up. So Buster knew he was a qualified director, and he just wouldn't treat people that way. I don't know why Alan Schneider would have thought that... Buster of course, being very shy, would not sit there and...

First of all, he had no idea what Film was about, y'know, it was wierd, he read it through and he didn't know what they were aiming for. Since he didn't understand anything that they were aiming towards, and he had the job and the contract was signed, he was going to have to do it, and he just dumped it back in their laps, in effect, 'What time do I show up and what do I wear?' and did exactly as he was told, whatever Schneider or Beckett told him to do, he did. But see also, he starts his opening sentence there and shows his lack of up to dateness on Buster's career and life, because it says 'Keaton had arrived in Manhattan, the first time in many years.' and we had spent more time in New York from 1950 to that thing than we spent anywhere else, because he was doing television *all* the time. And we were in and out of there all the time, going to Europe and back. And I know he said that, about the welsh rarebit, in the hotel room that day, not on the set. Alan Schneider was a strange man anyway, he was super-intellectual, super-artistic type person, which was not Buster's type to begin with, although they got along fine. But as I say, Buster just put himself in their hands. Because he didn't know what they were talking about, I think they may have been the only two in the world that did.

Imaginary four handed poker game in which Thalberg owes Keaton 2,000,000 bucks.... circa 1927 or earlier.....

No. That is pure fiction, the whole thing. First of all Buster didn't play poker, he didn't like to play poker, and he wouldn't sit and do something like that. He's writing an article for a magazine or a book or something. He's filling pages. Whatever sketchy truth there is he's putting stuff in there to make it long enough, y'know, padding it out.²⁷¹

On Buster offering to pad Film with ideas from 1927 for a price...

Buster did not need the money. We were not poor by any means, so that's another fiction. He might have suggested maybe a couple of little mild gags to fit in there to lighten it up a little bit, but he certainly would never ask for money.

???: "The working conditions were abominable, poor Buster, it was a hundred and ten degrees under the Brooklyn Bridge, and we weren't under the Brooklyn Bridge, we were alongside of it, and Buster was running, running, running, and it was all broken bricks. He never

²⁷¹[When I interviewed Eleanor I had this article pegged as somewhat doubtful, her response is above, and I have since located the origin of this story of the phantom poker game, but as the original is anonymous [and very doubtful] I will not grace it with a mention. I have also discovered Mr. Schneider playing loose with older quotes, doubtless to pad his article as Eleanor suggests.]

complained, the man.. I'm not making him into a saint, it's just it was true, he just simply could take any amount of pain and travail." That's correct?

Yes, he never complains, y'know.

September one. Pajama Party, another kid picture. They were made for kids, and Buster was in about four or five of them. He played different parts, in Pajama Party he was an indian chief.

How did he feel about them?

Take the money, they paid well. Why not? He liked to work and he liked the money. He enjoyed 'em. It got him out of the house. He had no ego for heavens sake.

None whatsoever?

None at all.

Have you ever met anyone else that you can compare that to?

Old time theatrical people that came from night clubs, vaudeville, Broadway theater, whatever, most of them were that way. There was a few big egos around from Broadway, that were too good for pictures or anything else, but most, no. Most of the people that go way back, that was their way of making a living, and it was their job, and they did their job to the best of their ability, and that's the way most of them felt, including Buster, his whole family, all his friends, they none of them had big egos.

But you say Buster had none. Surely there were some times he dug his heels in and got fed up with

It only had to do with very bad material, that somebody's words were etched in gold and couldn't be changed, where the writer had the ego problem, and they wouldn't change anything, then he'd get testy about it.

August seven, that was one of the kid pictures, Beach Blanket Bingo or the like.

National Film Board of Canada. September third to October tenth. That was Railrodder.²⁷²

Gerald Potterton['The Railrodder' Director, meets Buster at N.Y.hotel]: "And I said, "Well, we want you to basically get on one of these little railway cars and go from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific." He said, "Sounds crazy, I'll do it!"

Then there was a lot of noise coming from outside in Central Park, and he got up, went over to the window, lifted the window up, and yelled out,

"QUIET!!"

to the whole of Manhattan, closed the window, sat down, and said, "When do we start?" "

[Buster wanted, and got, a wild duck dinner written into his contract.]

It was just pure fun. We flew to Montreal and took the train to Halifax, Nova Scotia, went out on a boat and watched them fish for tuna, and those guys were catching tuna the size of the boats. I've never seen anything like it in my life. It would take three or four men hours to get the tuna up to the boat.. It would take a factory to can it all, I presume it was good because the water was just like ice. Ice cubes floating in it so the fish had to be good. But we watched that.

²⁷²[Nearly everyone I know who knew who Keaton was had seen this picture only. General opinion was very favourable.]

Anyway, then we started the film of the Railrodder, of him coming out of the ocean outside of Halifax, Nova Scotia. It starts there, and it took us six weeks to get from there to Vancouver.

If the water was that cold, what was Buster doing getting underneath it?

Very carefully set up shot, and he only got wet to here, [waist] went in and out very fast, and it was one take, because the feet were purple by the time he did that much.

The other water, well, the beginning is him jumping off the London Bridge, in London, and that was a double that actually did that, the dirty scummy river. I'm glad it wasn't Buster. Catch a disease. At the other end, in Vancouver, a chinese man comes up out of the ocean and steals his cart. So except for that one shot in Halifax, he never got into the water.

It was a wonderful trip, we had our own private car..

On a train?

Oh yes. And they had it all figured and routed before we ever got there. We had the Queens car, with all her china, her stewards, everything. They had it routed so they allowed so much time in each town or each place we stopped. And The Canadian National.. the train would pick us up and take us to wherever we were going and they'd drop our car off, and they'd go about their business for say like a week or four days or whatever. Next train coming through would pick us up and take us to our next stop. We had a railroad man with us the whole way of course, that coordinated all this stuff. Oh, it was a ball, we had a wonderful time. Johnny Spotton and his assistant were the Keaton Rides Again crew, that's all there was, just the two of them, and there was only five or six at most for The Railrodder, the cameraman, assistant cameraman, prop man, Gerry of course, and his assistant who was a girl, and Buster and I, that was about it, except our steward and our cook and our waiter on the train.

Didn't they have any trouble clearing the tracks for all this hand cart work?

No, they either stopped the trains or scheduled off hours or something. Never had any problem, that wasn't designed and called for. They had traffic problems in Montreal on purpose, very carefully timed. And you see it from the front, I'm sure, I wasn't there, but I'm sure it was just an engine, there wasn't any train behind it.

Wouldn't have made much difference if it had hit...

You're dead no matter how many cars are on that train, if they mis-time it.

Keaton Rides Again was just a black and white made about how we made the Railrodder. Johnny Spotton wore a shoulder holster with the 16mm. camera, and wherever he looked, that's where the camera was pointed, and his assistant carried cable and adjusted whatever. He shot everything, as you can see in the film, Keaton's temper tantrums and everything, he shot. We were sitting round one day and I said,

"The first time I'm in the shower and I see that damn lens peeked over the top of the shower door, you have had it! I'm gonna kill ya!" I said it with all our troupe there, and everybody laughed.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE.

I do worse things in my sleep than that.

1965. Keaton Rides Again. Venice. Forum.

BUSTER KEATON RIDES AGAIN.

National Film Board of Canada. 1965. Documentary of the making of *The Railrodder*.

Excerpts:

'There is no longer doubt of his immortality.'

'Each new gag must conform to Keaton's law, the situations can be wildly outlandish, but it must be possible that the events on the screen could happen in real life.'

'He has been insisting for the last three or four years that he is at least partially retired and intends to retire completely, until the phone rings; but then he'll turn right around and tell somebody he's retiring. It wouldn't work out, because if the phone didn't ring for a month he would feel terribly neglected and abused because [in baby talk voice..] nobody wanted him anymore, nobody loved him anymore, nobody wanted him to work anymore:.. but deep down I know darn well that he enjoys working or he wouldn't say

"Yes."

He was known as 'The Little Iron Man' around the studio, nothing stopped him, or there wasn't anything he didn't try. He's slowed down and come round to the line of thinking that he can do other smaller or less dangerous things that can be *almost* as funny. He may not consider them as funny as falling off the whole top of a building or something, but they're funny enough to get by, let's put it that way.

His personal dexterity, in jumping around there like a mountain goat doesn't bother me. More what worries me more than anything else is him catching cold running around in rain and things like he's done a couple of times, because with this chronic bronchitis that he has he can go into pneumonia in about three days without half trying if you don't nip it in the bud. I'm travelling with antibiotics, pills, and everything else, so if he catches cold I start him on them immediately. He's had pneumonia once already. The first morning when I talked to the doctor he says,

"If he lives five days I'll let you know what I think." On the sixth day, that was it, he was ready to go home, looking like an octopus with all the tubes and the attachments here and there.'

Potterton: "[Keaton was a]...fantastic practical jokes person, He's standing by a locomotive coming to a slow stop, he'll catch hold of the bar, and stop it. And it really looked like he had stopped this hundred and fifty ton locomotive. And I think that's the thing that really got to people working with him was his natural ability to think up natural gags."

He just did it. That wasn't rehearsed or anything. Johnny Spotton just so happened to have that camera on him at all times so he picked up those things. I'd go down into our den, he'd be down there watching television, playing cards doing whatever, and I'd go down there and he'd be in the middle of the room, doing something, he was writing, writing a sketch. Any stranger that walked in would think there was a demented insane creature there, but I knew what he was doing and I'd turn round walk out and leave him alone. That's what he was doing with all these weird gestures, stoop, squat, bend, kick, whatever he

happened to be doing. He'd be writing a ... he never put anything on paper but it was always in his head. But as I say, anything became a prop for him.

It's a very interesting talent don't you think? almost a unique one. Do you see it as a talent or a skill?

Talent. I think a skill is learned. Talent is there. You can't learn talent, you can learn skills. There's some of each there as far as he's concerned, skill in how to work it out, and talent to think of it in the first place.

In the beginning of Keaton Rides Again we got through with a deep sea fishing trip, and interviews and a big lunch and this and that, and went up to the room and the news people followed us right into the room, and I pushed him down on the bed and took his shoes off, and Buster says,

"I'm going to have to get rid of her." some such thing.

At this point it's almost as if you've become his keeper more than his partner.

No. I always said I was his secretary, mother, book-keeper, wife, whatever, I don't think I ever said nurse, but I assumed the position of mother occasionally when he needed it.

So you'd have to be on his list of mothers?

Yeah. He had lots of 'em. He had more fathers really than mothers, he had a whole lot of fathers. Everybody always thought he was totally helpless.

Which, of course, couldn't have been further from the truth?

Right.

Why do you think they felt that way, what was it about Buster that gave that impression?

Possibly they saw the screen image before they knew him well, and he was not averse to letting them think that, he enjoyed being waited on and cared for.

In making The Railrodder, Jerry Potterton tried desperately not to have Buster ride that single track trestle, while being blinded with the map wrapped around him. It was only about six or seven foot wide, and he was terrified he was going to fall off of there.

On telling Buster he can't do it....

"That makes it tough.. I can't match scenes, cos I didn't have it in my mind that way so I don't know... If I went back now to protect this chase in close ups I wouldn't have the slightest idea what I was doing at the time I should to be doing it. So I can't make scenes match."

Potterton: "Don't forget there's still two other shots to complete the sequence Buster. There's the long shot of the bridge and then going over, that's the whole center of the gag is that long shot of the bridge."

"No, the bridge is not your gag, the bridge is only suspense."

[Slightly later, Buster is complaining to Eleanor...]

"He said it was too dangerous."

"I says

"Who suggested the gags?" he says

"You did." I said

"Well I generally know what I'm doing." That is not dangerous, that's child's play, for the love of Mike."

"Don't tell me about it."

"I told them,

"I do worse things in my sleep than that." Any time you're shooting gags, or laying them out in advance, you so often run into guesswork, or maybe his way's better than doin' it mine. You try to sell yourself one way or the other because there is a certain

amount of guess, *has* to be; but every now and then, ain't no guesswork. This is one of 'em."

Buster got to do it his way...

Potterton: "I loved Keaton. He was everything that you felt a great film comedian should be, both on and off the screen, and that was fantastic to find out, you know, that somebody that was a god to you was in fact a god."

In Rivers Manitoba, a wonderful little town, they gave him the key to the city, I think the key was bigger than the city. Little tiny town.²⁷³

U.S. Steel commercial the fourteenth of October.

Budweiser Beer, October twenty-five.

Donna Reed Show, October twenty-seven.

Oil Company in Atlanta, I didn't go with him on that. But the joke in that one was, it was a brand new beautiful, Pure Oil Gas station. They were redesigning all their gas stations to make them glamorous, so they wanted this commercial, and Buster's there running the station and some man had run out of gas way down the road somewhere, and he comes up, out of breath, panting, sweating. And Buster says,

"No problem." And he took the gas hose from the tank and (laughs) he and the man walk three or four blocks down the street to fill the guys tank. His hose was that long. They made it in Atlanta, Georgia, because I guess it was a Georgia gasoline.

December fifth of that year was another kid show, Beach Blanket Bingo. He played himself in the picture.

[Penelope Gilliatt.]

"When you take a fall,"

the ailing Buster Keaton explains to me from the top of a bookcase as he is nearing seventy, proceeding then to zoom towards the window,

"you use your head as the joystick."

The poetic human airship grounds delicately, and coughs.

"I won't do a weekly TV series. It's too much like hard work. Guess I turn down eighteen offers a season."

Keaton talked about his career with detachment. When he described the mechanics of a gag, or the difficulties of staging an intricate scene, only then did he become really engrossed. In between bouts of coughing, he demonstrated some hilarious moments, and paced the room with that unique Keaton walk.

The room was decorated with photographs, certificates, and awards. A billiard table occupied one side of it; on the other was what Keaton called his saloon. It was about the size of a telephone kiosk, but fitted with authentic swing doors, and a sign: 'Stage Door.'

"Everybody has a cocktail bar, I go for one of these. It has a spittoon, a brass rail, and draught beer. If you like beer, this is the best in town. This is a seven-and-a-quarter-gallon tank; instead of the old system of running it out of a wooden keg through coils, this is an icebox. I use an aluminium barrel, so it's the temperature of the icebox. No coils. No ice.

In the far corner hung two cowboy hats, from Texas and Oklahoma cattlemen's associations, and next to them a fireman's hat, signifying honorary membership of the Buffalo, New York, fire department. There was also a replica of a confederate kepi. An Oscar

²⁷³[This large, decorative, plaster of paris key hangs on the wall of Eleanor's apartment. The presentation ceremony in Keaton Rides Again is a highly affecting moment.]

stood on a table- next to an Eastman Award. It was the Eastman Award which Keaton seemed most proud of and most anxious to display.

There are only twenty of those in existence. They gave one to the five male stars of motion picture history- and it's one of those I've got.

Here's a picture for you. This is the best still picture I've got. It shows a dinner held at the Roosevelt Hotel to welcome Rudolph Valentino into United Artists. Here are eight of the ten top stars of motion pictures- William S. Hart, Norma Talmadge, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino, Constance Talmadge, me- the two missing are Harold Lloyd and Gloria Swanson. It's a great photograph. Today you couldn't duplicate it, because if you managed to assemble eight of the top stars, by the time you could get them together a couple wouldn't be in the top ten. They come and go too fast.

1965

Here's another Pure Oil commercial in January in Chicago.

Another kid picture in January of sixty-five.

Another U.S. Steel, January fifteenth.

Sunacre Apple Juice. March. He must have made a whole bunch of those because it took him a week to do it. That was in New York I know, because I was there.

Jonathon Winter's show in April, he had his own TV show.

Commercial in Salt Lake City on twenty-six-seven-and-eight, I have no idea what that means.

Did another set of Ford commercials in July.

We were in Rome, July and August, for that terrible Italian picture.

[Two Marines And A General. (War Italian Style) American-International. Released posthumously 1967.]

Buster played Rommel. These comics were very big in Italy and nowhere else.

Nobody in the world thought they were funny but a few Italians. And it looked like that picture Buster made in Mexico for Alex Salkind, it looked like it was made for a dollar twenty-nine cents, just awful cheap stuff. But as I say, they paid him a lot of money and he and Martha Hire, a beautiful blonde American lady, she was the lead in it, and the two of them just worked their way through it and got it over with. It turned up on American television a few years later at three in the morning or something, and we were always grateful that that's when it was shown.

..And in the middle of that we went to the Venice Film Festival over the weekend.

VENICE FILM FESTIVAL.

'Buster Keaton, who is making in Rome a film in which he plays a German general, was given an ovation the like of which I have not witnessed in all my years of covering film festivals. Even the most sedate journalists stood on their chairs to cheer. Keaton's presence had been arranged by those connected with a twenty-minute short called Film, in which Keaton appears, for the most part with his back to the camera, and which has a script by Samuel Beckett and direction by Alan Schneider.'

We went to the theater twice, the first time they showed Beckett's Film, and he was onstage at a table, with a press conference, then we went back to the hotel,

had lunch and took a nap or whatever, and then when we went back to the theater.

Raymond Rohauer: "What I didn't know was how much the press was really interested in Keaton, because that, of course, we didn't know until the day arrived.

When we got to the auditorium, I said,

"We have to go in here." He said,

"What we goin' in there for? I thought we were to go to the hotel."

I said,

"Yeah, well, but we have to stop off and say hello to the director of the festival. He's in this building." I said, "Just go through this door." I opened the door, and everybody in the room stood up, turned around to the back door and started applauding Buster Keaton, and I had to push him in because he wouldn't go. I pushed him in the back into the auditorium, so he had no choice."

John Gillett or James Blue: "Keaton stomped onto the stage, surrounded by various festival officials, sat down at the table in the middle of the stage and just glared at us, unsmiling. Then by some sort of curious mass will, we all got up and moved down into the front of the theater, somebody shouted out,

"Caro Buster!" photographers shouted out

"Look this way!" and clambered up onto the stage like all the Italian photographers do. Keaton remained passive on the stage, the applause grew, there was a great deal of shouting, a sort of joyful pandemonium prevailed. And then, slowly a little smile came over his face, and he bent forward and said

"Glad to see you."

And from that moment on the whole thing was very mellow and nice."

Saturday, 4 September 1965 was Buster Keaton day at the Venice Festival. At the Press Conference after the preview of Film, the appearance of the familiar stocky figure determinedly stumping on to the platform was the signal for a standing ovation of wild affection from the press.

"Caro Buster..." said somebody happily, after a long pause while Keaton blandly seated himself among a line of fussing officials, and went on to ask what he thought of the Beckett film. The hoarsely grating voice promptly replied,

"I don't know what it was all about, perhaps you can tell me."

A hand waved expressively in the air:

"The camera was behind me all the time. I ain't used to that."

What was he doing in Italy? He was making a comedy called Two Marines and a General-

"I'm the General."

Loud cheers made it clear that the audience agreed, and an attempt by the young lady valiantly struggling with three languages to translate this as 'Il Maresciallo' was drowned by roars of protest.

Keaton was obviously warming to his task. He stood up and started talking without waiting for questions, and spoke of the new Dick Lester film he was shortly joining in Spain.

"I've had several offers, but couldn't take 'em. No time to spare"

- and there was a certain satisfaction in the way he said these last words, as if his present activity made up a little for the waste and neglect of the last twenty years. One notes that, unlike certain comedians, Keaton does not need to keep up a stream of wisecracks. Buster himself had taken over the Palazzo, in full command of his audience once again.

Raymond Rohauer: "And so we were walking to the hotel, and Buster started to get a coughing spell, and his coughing got worse, and so we sat there for a few minutes And he said,

"Now I want you to pick and choose who I have to talk to, but I can't do many."

So, the first person that came to me was James Blue and John Gillett."

That's correct?

Right.

At the evening gala show, more unexpectedly, the smart Venetian audience rose to their feet with delighted applause as the celebrities took their places. Somebody in the next seat poked Keaton. He looked surprised. 'For me?' one could almost hear the dead-pan eyebrow exclaim; and he got up and bowed, beautifully.'

Benayoun: I will never forget Keaton's personal appearance at the Cinematique. He was silenced for twenty minutes by the cheering. His great pale face had changed, naturally, yet still was unchanging. His mouth drooped, its expression grimmer. His hairline had receded, and an impressive set of lines accented his features without betraying them. The line of his nose, more aquiline than ever, accentuated the darkness in his eyes, now wrinkled and heavy-lidded. His is not the face of a faded clown. His face is a rich landscape, a rugged southwestern terrain, a badland. It is a heroic history piece, carved out with a scarcely visible motion; it has matured into a symbol of courage, tenderness and philosophical simplicity. The experience seemed to restore him, seemed to dispel the past's hard knocks. The short-legged figure shuffled modestly at the mike. Gradually the applause gave way to a stony silence. Anxious at having to live up to the unexpectedly enthusiastic welcome, Buster finally, hoarsely, said something (sparking this very book in the process):

"Would somebody like to ask me a question?"

Dramatically the silence grew heavier still. Nobody even stirred. So Buster, standing center screen as he always liked to do (center stage, I should say, just below the screen), trained his eyes on the man in the center seat, front row, and said,

"Would you like to ask me a question?"

By pure coincidence, I was that man in the front row. And I was dumbfounded by this sudden close-up, this Keaton look which for once was directed quite literally at me—urgently, with no subjective illusion, no mediating magic. I haven't the faintest recollection what I stammered then, it was simply the cue for a monolog from Keaton which got everything going again, as if someone had turned the music back on, and the rest of the evening is lost in an emotion as overwhelming as that of the child....'

This is the first time I've ever been invited to a film festival, but I hope it won't be the last.

He said fighting back the tears.

He was so ill, he was sick as a dog and ill, he wasn't even holding down food very well. He had no energy or strength left.

Was it likely he'd cry?

He cried at the ovation he got in the theater. The evening show is when he got the ovation, and Buster and I, and a couple of the people from the festival probably, were sitting in the front row of the balcony. It was a standing ovation that went on and on and on. It was before the Film.

Gillet and Blue: Next day, we were able to interview Keaton at the Excelsior Hotel. Several other papers and television networks also had the same idea, and we had to wait a little while. Eventually we saw him peering through a door off the main foyer, apparently wiping down the glass panel with his handkerchief for the benefit of a lady admirer. It was only when he put his head through the space and started cleaning the 'glass' from the other side that we realized that it was a beautiful Buster gag.

Keaton started talking almost before we got our equipment ready, and insisted on giving us the most comfortable chairs. He sat bolt upright on the other side of the table, large eyes staring straight ahead, with the Great Stone Face set throughout in expressive immobility except for one charming moment duly noted in the interview. Our questions triggered off an immediate response, precise down to the last detail, almost as if his films were parading before

him as he talked. And in his mind, Keaton the director seemed quite inseparable from Buster the actor.'

When we finished that, in September we went to Madrid for A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum. He was doing falls in a Funny thing etc. and that was six months before he died.

And how did you feel about that?

He knew what he was doing, he never got hurt, he didn't hurt himself. Things that would drive me up the wall screaming.... He always wore those great big enormous shoes,...

...They weigh about five pounds each. These shoes are eleven and a half, I wear a seven and a half, so I got a lot of room in here....

...and when he was working on those summer fairs, he came off one night after doing his thing and sat down and took off his shoe, and the whole end of his foot was bloody, and then he took off his sock, and his big toe-nail had caught in a seam in the big shoe, because it was much too long for him and it went right back. It was still attached, so I always had a mini first aid kit, so I took it and I washed his foot off real good and got it clean, and held the toe-nail tight until I could get it to almost stop bleeding, and then I bandaged it and put band-aids on real tight. That stopped the bleeding. And I re-bandaged and re-taped that thing a couple of times a day, until finally the toe-nail just came off, by then the new one was half grown out underneath. But things like that, he wouldn't pay any attention to it. I'd have been on crutches if it had been me.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM.

Dir. Dick Lester.

It was amazing, because it was only September or October, and normally it's still warm in Spain, this was Madrid. It was freezing cold the whole time we were there, and rained. Buster loved to go to the bullfights, and they postponed the bullfights every Sunday because it was raining, and it's too dangerous to do in the rain. So we just sat in a hotel room and watched the rain every Sunday. But they were all wearing bare feet and togas, and they almost froze to death. The sun never came out for the whole three weeks Buster was there. And they had been shooting there before he arrived, and almost everything they'd done before that was interiors, they saved the exteriors for the end when it rained. That always happens.

Dick Lester: "He was just the first person that enchanted me totally in terms of sitting in the cinema and watching films; and I didn't really know anything about what the cinema had to offer until I started seeing Keaton's films, and I was just overwhelmed by what he did. So, when the opportunity came up to have the chance of working with him, I leapt at it, because he, to me, was the master. The fact that he was dying was a shock; but nobody seemed to realize quite what state he was in, and in fact he didn't either, he thought he had a rather advanced case of asthma.

The only really favourite director I have is Buster Keaton. He was an absolute master. We can learn a great deal about the economies that he employed, the cutting and the positioning of the camera. He had that wonderful gift of using the space around the performer for comic effect. That's very rare. It seemed effortless, that's what was lovely...."

Did you learn much from talking to Keaton when you directed him in Forum?

Lester: "A fair amount, yes. He wasn't very well, and he wasn't able to do very much in the film technically, but he used to tell me how he would make films and how he would preview them. How when a scene

wouldn't quite work, it wasn't a question of going back and recutting it, but of throwing the whole thing out and shooting a complete new sequence. He didn't fiddle about, which is in many ways very correct. It was possible in his day because every one was under a 52 week contract and all it cost was the raw stock and the petrol for the cars. He wasn't the kind of man who gave advice. He was a very modest, relaxed man who loved the craftsmanship of his work."

Have you any particular favourites among his films?

Lester: "Our Hospitality and The General, I think, and Cops. The General is closest to being technically perfect: it isn't the most uniformly funny, but I find it a masterpiece in terms of economy. The Navigator is wondrously good. I sit and watch, thinking, 'Christ! How did he manage that?' For hysterical laughter it's hard to beat Laurel and Hardy, who are just throwing 87 pies or just trying to get a car to come apart, but with Keaton the ingenuity of a gag or a device was wondrous. It was the sense of achievement that I find amazing in his films. You can't fool an audience, ever. Any audience in the world smells when something is real."

Your editing is so fragmented in comparison with his...

Lester: "Only because he did his better. I believe that the best possible gag happens in one. If you can't do it in one because the actor isn't an acrobat or you can't rig the gag or don't have the money to rig it, then you start putting in cut-aways to allow it to happen. In many ways what is known as the frenetic editing style is due to expediency. I remember in Forum, when Keaton was running along through a forest and chariots were passing and I was using a fast-cutting technique, it wasn't by choice. It was because physically he couldn't run very far, couldn't see the chariots well enough to keep out of their way, so I had to use a double for him and a stunt man was doing the actual running.

So instead of having a shot where you could see clearly both Keaton and the chariots in one- which was practicable, it was only a question of timing- I had to do a long shot with a double, then the close-up to remind you it's really Keaton, then the mid-shot where the chariots run past, then back to the long-shot with the double doing a bit more, then back to Keaton. So you have six cuts where you didn't want any of them."

If you had known before you started production, would you have thrown out that scene and substituted something different?

Lester: "I think if I had had time, I would have tried to put him more into the film in ways that he could still serve. I would certainly not have recast him."

Mick Dillon [Keaton's double]: "Only through Dick Lester giving me permission to say this, that I doubled him, because the man was ill; I mean he was dying, you know. I would never have said it. Anyway if I said it in cold blood to anybody that I work with, y'know, 'Oh yeah, I doubled Buster Keaton.' they'd lock you up.....

...he ran straight into the tree and took everybody's breath away. Like a brick wall, Oh! What's he??? We thought he hadn't seen it, but that was the way he did it, he just ran straight into it, with his head, Bang! Marvellous."

Seven, fourteen, '65. How To Stuff A Wild Bikini. A Rock-n-roll beach frolic, and he was a witch doctor in that. [Who changes Frankie Avalon into a pelican so he can fly back to Annette Funicello.]

Eight, eighteen, '65. Sergeant Deadhead, thats the kid stuff again. 'Keaton plays a private eye at a missile base who pushes some wrong buttons at a crucial moment' And he had a good time on that one because, the comic that bashes everybody, he bad-mouths everybody is his comedy routine. But they sat with their feet up and yammered for days, had a good time between scenes and everything. They were all in fatigue uniforms to do the whole thing, desert tan uniforms.

Norman Taurog: "Just before Buster died, he was still funny, still funny. I remember he said to me,

"Hey, Norm, I can get you a surefire belly laugh."

I said, "How?" He said,

"Let me run with the fire hose. Let me run to the end of it and let me go straight up and land down."

I said, "Buster, at your age, are you out of your mind?" He said,

"I won't hurt myself, Norm, I've done it for years."

I said, "Go ahead and do it." and he did it. He must have gone six or eight feet in the air and let flap. I'm scared to death to say 'Are you all right, Buster?' so I went halfway in, and Buster said,

"I'm all right !"

Norman Taurog. Dir. Sgt. Deadhead. and longtime friend from the silent era.

Then October third we went to Toronto for The Scribe.

That was the last thing he did, which was horrifying because it was so cold and the whole thing was shot up on top of a steel scaffolding of a building they were building. It was made for the safety association. It was to be amusing and funny but to show the crews, construction men, why they had to wear the high boots with the steel toes and the steel hats and everything, for protection. I don't know what it was all about but that was the main reason for it.

Bill Cox [Writer and Friend]: "He caught a cold making a commercial up in Canada. He thought that's what it was, bad cold and pains, and bronchial pains and one thing and another. Actually it was cancer of the lung, it was so far gone it was inoperable."

Well, he was very very ill through the whole thing, that's when the cancer was getting very bad, all the doctor ever told him was he had bronchitis, and the beginnings of emphysema, but he wouldn't tell him anymore than that because he didn't want him to be frightened, and as a matter of fact he wasn't all that sure until we got home after this thing. I had to take him off a plane in a wheelchair he was so short of breath, he couldn't breathe, and I took him right straight to the doctors office. He X-rayed everything in sight, said, "Take him over to the hospital, I'll call and get a bed." And I said, "We'll go home and I'll pack his pajamas..."

"Take him to the hospital, go pack the pajamas after."

...put him right in the hospital and did biopsies and all kinds of things. Anyway, after all the tests came back, the next morning I was up there and he told me, he said....

"He'll have a week to three months. That's all I can tell you." One lung was clear gone, and he was operating on only a half of the other, and he had had a clean bill of health in April. So that's how fast carcinoma moves.

All the doctor ever told Buster was that he had chronic bronchitis.

And the last thing he did, December fifteenth, was Lowrys/Levys Rye Bread.

It was a New York bread company. They came out and shot a bunch of still pictures, at our home.

I've had a very interesting career. I have no complaints!

This must have been money coming in in 1966, he didn't work. Art and Design. It was 10,000 dollars and it was a delayed payment from Canada, from Toronto. It could have been from The Scribe.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO.

"I work more than Doris Day."

1966. Cancer.

1966

Jacques Tati is such an admirer of of his that he has composed a score for *The Navigator*, which will be reissued this fall.

That picture was made forty-two years ago, and it still holds up. I said they could add music, but that's all. Best not to tamper with the old ones.

With a face like mine, I guess they figure who needs dialog? When I was a baby my folks were in vaudeville. One day my Dad looked at me and said, "Son, you better get into show business, 'cause with a face like that you'll never get a job any place else." I got my first paycheck when I was four and made my first picture in 1917. They didn't let me talk for more than thirty years after that.

They'll do anything for a laugh today. But people aren't laughing. I think it's because the comics are all alike. In the old days, when Chaplin and I were great friends, Charlie would give me gags right out of his own pictures if they didn't seem right, and I'd do the same for him. They don't trade anymore. They just steal."

"He cried like a baby when De Mille died," says his wife Eleanor.

I never said anything like that, and I'm sure Buster didn't cry when De Mille died. I don't think he knew him that well. De Mille was purely Paramount pictures and Buster never was, had very little if any social contact. The only time he ever spent any time around him was in Sunset Boulevard. I can't remember Buster talking about De Mille hardly at all. I think Rex Reed was just having a wonderful time filling up space. Rex Reed by the way, I think he's still around, big flying queen, gay as a bird, and a lot of his stuff is fantasy kind of stuff. He used to write a column. I wouldn't put a lot of stock in his...

Yes, but I'm not sentimental by nature. Sure I miss the Keystone Cops and Mack Sennett and Stan and Oliver and the rest, but I don't moon over the past. I don't have time.

We're twenty-five miles from Hollywood, so we gave up driving into town to go to the movies. The only time I see my friends is on the late show.

I drive by (the Motion Picture Relief Home, about a mile and a half from his farm) sometimes and talk to the old-timers, but it makes me so sad I don't do it often. They live in the past, I don't. One Easter Sunday I went to a party at Mary Pickford's house. Everybody from silent films was there. I tried to have fun, but I discovered we had nothing to talk about. Some of them had never heard a Beatles record. They haven't kept up with the times.

That sounds like Buster. Not necessarily his words, but the sense of what he's saying is there.

I had four friends who retired at the age of sixty-five and they were dead within a year. They simply had nothing to do, nothing to occupy their minds. I have so many projects coming up I don't have time to think of kicking the bucket. People are always telling me I'm immortal. I might just prove them right. Hell, the way I feel, I might just live forever.

In essence that would be something he would say even if Reed re-arranged the sentences to make them more grammatical. They were always correcting Buster's English, let's put it that way.

He stays young, he says, through hard work and nothing else. He doesn't eat nutburgers or drink spinach juice, has never read

Gayelord Hauser,²⁷⁴ and refuses to take vitamin pills. He has so much energy, his wife says, that the neighbourhood kids ring the doorbell constantly, wanting to know
"Can Buster come out and play?" [baseball]

John Kaufman: 'My parents had friends in the neighbourhood named Burt and Trudy Cowlin. One day they called up and said they had someone at their house I ought to meet. It turned out it was Buster Keaton and his wife Eleanor. Though twelve years old at the time, I cared about film, especially those of the great silent clowns, and was pretty excited.

Keaton was friendly in a gruff sort of way, never talking down to children as most adults seem to do. He was fascinated with Burt's railroad trains, set up in the basement, and played with them for hours.'

He had carcinoma, which is the fastest worst kind of cancer, and it went very fast.

[Dardis' book was called 'The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down' because Buster wouldn't lie down in his last hours. However I found the description evasive and unconvincing. I asked Eleanor about one detail, then another, and as the answers more and more contradicted Dardis, I just read his whole description to Eleanor, with the following results.]

'When the Cox's came to visit one night and Lee recommended the use of a heating pad, Buster told them it wouldn't do him any good.

"Heat won't do any good. It's something that heat can't help."

Eleanor realized then that he knew the truth.'

It could be, or the fact that his neck and shoulders used to get very stiff and tied up and he used to go and stretch out on the bed with the heating pad, and lay on it and watch television, so that's why he knew that it wasn't going to do any good. It would loosen him to a certain extent, loosen the muscles, but no long term cures.

'Jane Dula...

Dulo, she squawked because he spelt her name wrong.

....came over for sunday brunch on the thirtieth of January in 1966.'

She was there every week.

'During their usual bridge game both Eleanor and she noticed that Buster's scoring was highly erratic. He had trouble concentrating and didn't seem to care much about the game.'

That would have been pretty unusual wouldn't it?

This is the day before he died. We played bridge all afternoon the day before he died. We played bridge till five o'clock in the afternoon, and he was gone by seven the next morning.

'They soon stopped playing and Buster went into the adjoining room to resume one of his unfinished solitaire games.'

We were playing bridge and we quit the game supposedly to start fixing dinner and left him alone and he supposedly started a solitaire game.

Supposedly?

I doubt that he got to it, but anyway, it's the same table, he didn't move, we did.

We left the room.

Oh, it says he went into the next room and continued an unfinished solitaire game.

No. It was all in the same place, we were the ones that left. Louise was there too, but Louise left and went home, it was like five thirty or so in the evening and she wanted to get home before dark, she had a long drive.

²⁷⁴(That was one of the early diet gurus and he and Garbo were lovers for years. She advocated his diets and all that kind of thing.)

'Half an hour later they heard a choking and gasping sound and rushed in to find him unconscious. He was taken to the hospital immediately and spent the night there. Buster refused to stay in bed during most of the night, repeatedly asking Chick, his male nurse, the question:

"Why don't I just give up? why don't I?"

Does that sound likely?

He might have. He was in a rage.

A rage?

Totally enraged by the whole thing. The bare idea of him being ill was just too much for him to bear.

Hadn't he ever been ill before?

Minor type things wouldn't have bothered him, but the fact was that this was serious and he knew it and he was damn mad about it. He was in a total rage that whole last twelve hours which was about all it lasted, thank God.

Had you ever seen him in a rage before?

Oh yeah, but nothing, y'know, over some piece of material or something he'd yell at himself or me or the hotel room walls or something, but it wasn't any big deal, didn't last very long. But this; he knew.

And he was totally enraged by it?

Of course. You've always heard the old saying about going out kicking and screaming, well he did. He didn't wanna go.

'All that long afternoon Buster kept walking about his house, upstairs and downstairs.'

He got angry with me because I kept walking behind him all the time for fear he'd fall down the steps... I'm going up and down stairs from the den to the living room, and back and forth, and getting angry because I was behind him catching him if he fell. And he was just a horror, absolute horror. And Chick and I'd look at each other and say, 'Oh God. How long's this...' Y'know.

'He was fully conscious but frequently was unaware of where he was or who was with him.'

He didn't pay any attention to who was anywheres near him except to keep them away. He did not want any help.

'Jane had to leave for her home in the late afternoon, and for the first time in her life she was heartily embraced by her friend and teacher of eight years.'

First of all, that part about Jane staying over is wrong, she did not. When Buster had the seizure and we sent for the doctor the ambulance and Chick came and everything, when Chick got there she went home. She did not see him again alive. So that part about her staying overnight and all is not true.

Why would he make something like that up?

I don't know.

So do you think she was heartily embraced on the previous day.

No. Because we had been playing bridge and we'd just left the room before he had his seizure, they took him to the hospital, then she went home, and that's the last time she ever saw him.

'Buster finally got into his bed during the late evening after Chick went home....'

The night nurse had come on at eight o'clock, so then Chick did go home.

From the time he had the seizure at about five thirty in the afternoon and when I went and picked him up and brought him home it was almost noon the next day.

He'd been in the hospital overnight. I'd called Jim, the oldest boy and I said,

"Do you guys want the pool table?" and he said,

"Yes." and I said,

"Well, get out here and get it." because Chick and I talked about it, which was Buster's favorite room and where did he want to be, and I said,

"The den." but anyway, I called Jim, he came out and got the pool table, and all the equipment to go with the pool table and took it away, and in the meantime we'd called Abbey Rent and they brought a hospital bed in to put it in the middle of the room where the pool table had been. That all took place during the morning when Buster was still in the hospital.

Didn't Buster react to seeing his pool table replaced with a hospital bed?

I don't really think he was that aware, he was kind of in a fog. I asked him if he was hungry and if he wanted something to eat, and I said,

"How about soft-boiled eggs?" and he said,

"Good idea." so I fixed soft-boiled.. and he ate a little bit of it, but not much.

And he sat in his regular position at the bridge table, and he thought he was trying to play solitaire, nothing was making much sense. Everything was kind of slow-motion and funny. We played bridge all afternoon the day before he died. I don't know what-all drugs he'd had before that, but he didn't start to get nasty until a few hours later. This was between noon and say three or four o'clock was when he started to really go bad mentally, because the cancer had metastasized and gone to his brain is what happened.

I didn't get that word..

Metastases, that's when the cancer moves... had gone to his brain and that's what had caused the seizure, and he'd had headaches and a stiff neck for about five days before that, but that was the only symptom he had had before that. But anyway, the whole thing was very quick, thank God. In other words, he was at his favorite spot at the bridge table playing cards up until five o'clock Sunday, and by seven o'clock Monday he was gone, which he couldn't have asked anything better, he could have dragged on for days or weeks. We never told him what was the matter with him, he thought he had chronic bronchitis, and outside of having really bad coughing spells where he'd be almost totally out of breath; everything, you know. He just kept getting progressively weaker. Of course he'd had it, but he didn't know it, and lung cancer is not painful, there are no nerves in the lung so there's no pain involved, just shortness of breath.

And as a nicotine addict he'd never had shortness of breath before?

Oh, if he caught cold he probably had a nicotine hack cough, but he didn't even cough on a regular basis unless he had a cold before that.

It says here that Buster smoked Three to four packs a day.

I would say he smoked maybe two, he didn't smoke 'em all, he lit 'em, put 'em down in the ashtray and let 'em burn up, so there's really no way of knowing how much he actually smoked, except he was probably inhaling all that second-hand smoke coming out of the ashtray, which would be the same thing. So I would say maybe two packs a day.

'In the morning the doctors told Eleanor that there was nothing they could do for him and advised her to take him home. Jane Dulo had stayed overnight at the Keatons, and she and Eleanor drove him home. Chick, Eleanor and Jane attempted to talk him into getting into bed, but he refused to lie down.' Correct?

Yes, he wouldn't go to bed. Chick had to hit him with everything, for about three or four hours I guess, before we ever got him near a bed. Because Chick phoned his doctor and explained what was going on, and the doctor says,

"Snow him with everything you've got in the bag."

So Chick did. He gave him shots and pills and everything, and he took all the pills and all the shots Chick was poking into him. And Chick kept giving him shots and pills, it took something like two hours before he finally started winding

down enough to quit fighting it, because he knew if he ever lay down he wouldn't get up. He knew that. And finally I said,

"Do you think you could stretch out and have a little nap now?"

He says,

"Yeah, I guess so."

Of course his legs were like spaghetti. Chick got on one side and I got on the other. And he was sitting on a couch. We got him off the couch and three steps and onto the hospital bed, and once we did of course, he never got up. We got him into bed finally at eight or nine at night, something like that, and he did go out and he never came to. He was gone by six the next morning.

'At about six thirty in the morning the night nurse called Chick, who came over to the house and confirmed that Buster was dead. He awakened Eleanor at once, and she said

"He's gone."

You did?

Uhuh. The reason the night nurse called Chick, he wouldn't come and wake me up and tell me. He made Chick do it, and Chick had to get out of bed and get dressed and come out there to tell me.

Why, was the night nurse scared of you?

He didn't know me very well, we had known Chick for a long time, we were good friends, and he didn't know us that well, he just didn't want to be the one to do it, and he would have been due to go off shift in about an hour anyway, Chick would have been back on at eight anyway.

I'm very sorry to have dragged you through all that,...

That's all right. It doesn't bother me after all this time.

When he was ready to be buried, he had a rosary in one pocket and a deck of cards in the other, so he was set for whichever direction he was going.

Jack Donohue, one of our very best friends, he was a choreographer at MGM, he's the one that took the rosary, and my sister Jane took the deck of cards.

Because I never went over there. Once he was gone, he was gone. Jack Donohue asked my permission to do the rosary, I said,

"Of course." And Jane, my sister, was responsible for taking the deck of cards but I gave it to her to take. He had to have a deck of cards wherever he was going.

Did he have a religion?

Buster was protestant, but never a churchgoer.

I said the other day when I took you up there, [to Forest Lawn] I said,

"I never come up here, because he is not there."

Wherever he is I'm going to join him, I'll join him wherever he went.

I take it that what you are saying is that you really see yourself as part of Buster?

Yes. He was the greater part of my life. So why not rejoin him?

And you're not worried there'll be competition?

No. There was always competition. It didn't bother me.

Why didn't it bother you?

Because his only interest was in me. You could have laid four naked ladies in front of him and he'd've stepped over 'em, he wouldn't have paid any attention.

I'm supposed to ask more deeply intimate questions about your marriage, but I just can't bring myself to do it. I mean, obviously, you wouldn't have been there if it wasn't a good one.

Right. It was a very good one. We got along beautifully, never had any real fights or anything like that.

Did he complain of any of your habits?

He told my mother, I don't know whether it was before or after we were married, he says,

"You've raised a very good daughter. She doesn't want diamonds or pearls or houses or yachts, all she wants is four square meals a day." Because I used to eat like a horse in those days. In his opinion I could never be filled up. So that was the only thing I ever heard about me. And also, like if he'd get all gussied up to go somewhere like a premiere or something, that was formal, I'd get dressed, the long gown, the hair, the make-up the whole shot and get all ready to go. And I'd come out of the bedroom and say,
"How do I look?" He'd say,
"You'll do." That was a big compliment.

"Well, it was a great life. Sure it was."

Joseph Frank, [Buster] Keaton.

Born October 4. 1895.

Died February 1. 1966.

I don't understand Buster Keaton. No one ever will- even Buster himself.

Do you still think that's fair comment, or is Blesh making it up?

It would depend on what we'd been talking about. If he allowed everybody to sponge off of him all his life, that would be a reason I wouldn't understand. If he was talking about drinking in his past, that would be a reason I wouldn't understand, I do understand it, but...

The reason I sold the ranch, it was way too big for me, it involved having gardeners and swimming pool people, and I just didn't need that amount of space. And we owned six or eight other pieces of property, which were rental properties, and just about three or four months after Buster passed away, the nicest one of that whole bunch became empty. The lease ran out, the people that were there, so I moved there and sold the Ranch.

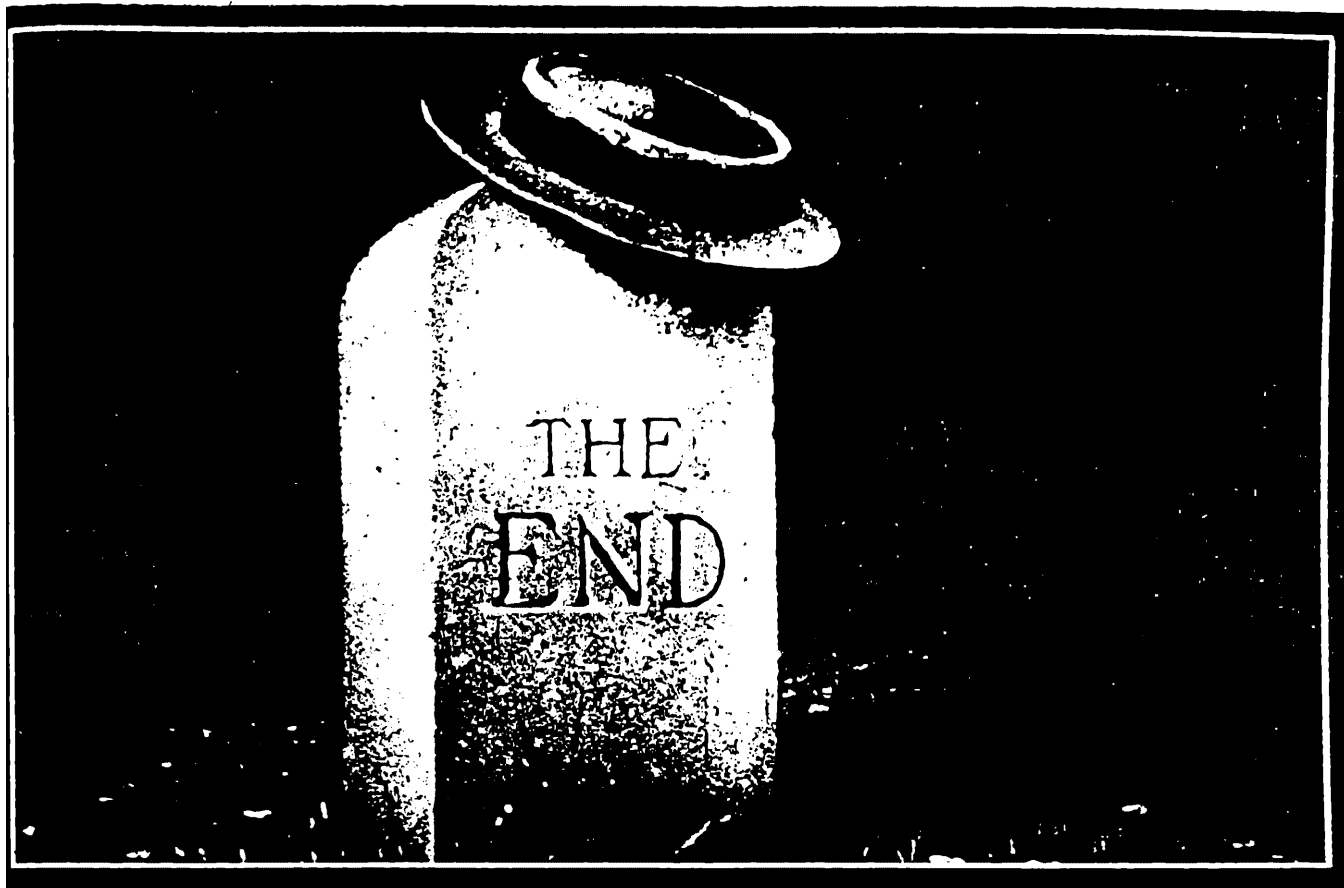
I don't have any collection of advertising or anything like that. He never saved anything, it would have amounted to having to rent a warehouse with Keaton things in, and he wasn't that interested in it anyway. So there was very little ever kept of advertising, write-ups, anything like that. I had a whole bunch of books before I moved here. My house had a basement, and we had a real bad winter with storms and everything, and I had a bunch of stuff packed in the basement, and I lost a lot of things. Buster memorabilia...

1969. Natalie dies of alcoholism. Constance dies in

1974. Leaving estate of over a million to Bobby and Jimmy.

Buster's two sons don't actually work, they're quite wealthy. They inherited all the Talmadge money from the mother and aunts because they were the only two children. The sisters, Norma and Constance, never had a child. So they don't have to work. One of them lives down around San Diego, California. The other one lives up in the middle part of California, towards San Francisco.

Loyal T. Lucas: "I've often said that if I ever got up to the pearly gates myself and looked in, and there was only one person in there, it would be my grandmother. But I had to correct that, there would have to be two people in there, because one of them would be my grandmother and the other would be Buster Keaton. He was, for my money, one of the grandest men that was ever put on this earth."



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THE MANY NAMES OF JOSEPH FRANK [BUSTER] KEATON.

known as "little Joe" until he got the name Buster.

Film fans have some strange names for me. For instance, in Siam I am called Kofreto.

In Cochinchina my name is Wong Wong.

In Liberia, Kazunk.

And in Moravia, Czecho-Slovakia and Northern Hungary I am referred to as Prysmysleno.

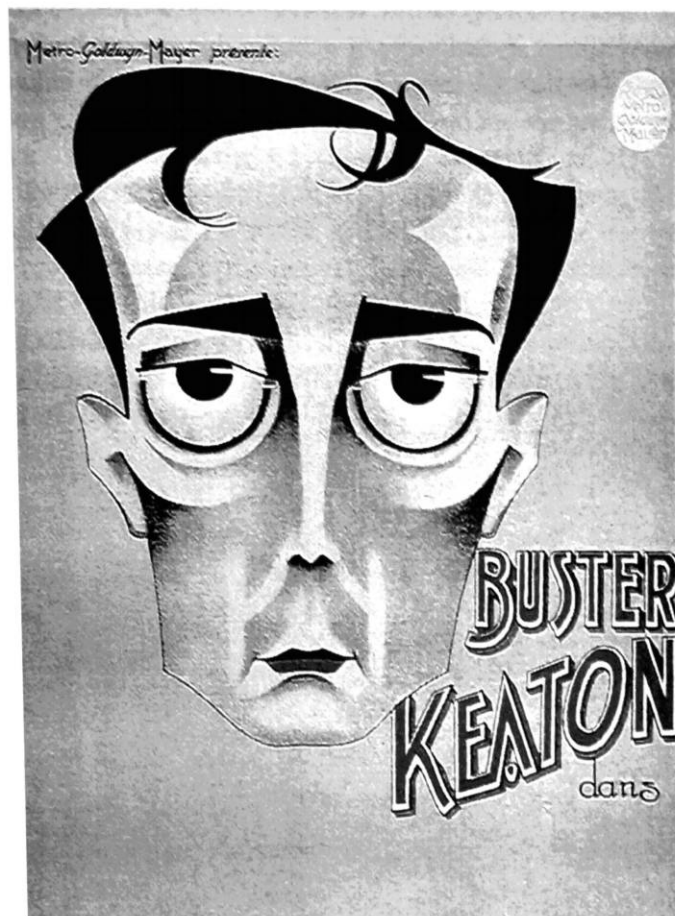
In Spain they call me Zephonio [later Pamplinas];

in Poland Zybsko;

and in France, Malec. [Previously Frigo]

In Iceland, I am dubbed Glo-go.

Also: Bus. Bussy. The Boss. Little Bussy. The Little Iron Man.



FALLS STUNTS AND ACROBATICS.

A trained acrobat seldom can get laughs in pictures when taking a comedy fall. He looks what he is, a trained acrobat doing his stuff, instead of a character in the picture taking a tumble accidentally. Though I have been called an acrobat I would say I am only a half acrobat, at most. I did learn to fall as a kid, but anyone who ever saw me throw a flip-flap realized I wasn't a professional acrobat. Audiences think a back somersault, in which you regain your feet without touching the floor, is difficult. But much more difficult to do is the flip-flap, a back somersault in which your hands do touch the floor. The back somersault only looks harder.

What I do know about is body control. When you start to go through the air your head is a rudder- it steers you. The man who jumps or dives has control of his body but, of course, if he is pushed, thrown, or falls accidentally he has none at all. That is why a man falling off a ladder can be terribly hurt.

Both ends of the spine have to be protected when taking a fall. For one kind of fall you must relax your whole body, for another you tighten up the muscles of both your back and backside.

We seldom rehearsed bone-breaking scenes. It was too easy for someone in the scene to be hurt or badly injured. Even if not put out of action the bruised man might dog his work the second time. For the same reason we tried to avoid retakes.

In those early films, oh, we got our bumps and bruises and sometimes got laid up for a couple of days; but seldom anything serious.



THE ART OF THE CUSTARD PIE.

I have always considered myself the world's champion custard-pie thrower. I think I proved I was still the champ when I caught George Givot squarely in the face with a pie from a distance of twenty-seven feet.

In our original 1917 recipe no custard is used, and, with a blonde the target, the filling is a mixture of blackberries, flour, and water, garnished with whipped cream. When a brunette is the one to be smeared, a lemon-meringue filling is substituted for the blackberries, which shows up better on the screen against a dark complexion.

Two crusts are cooked, one inside the other, until brittle. The double crust prevents crumbling when your fingers slide across the bottom in delivering the confectionary.

Tin plates are never used because of the danger of cutting the recipient's eyes, something that could happen when the plate slides sideways at the crucial moment of impact.

Now, anyone can do this one, it is called the walking thrust. All you need to do is walk up to him [the victim] and push it in his face. But before you start away, give it a slight twist. That's in the interests of efficiency. The slight turn makes the dough portion of the pie cling to the victim.

The shortest throw, across a distance of from three to six feet, is called a shot putt. When you have to throw the pie more than eight feet, the secret is to have enough dough in the pie so it will remain perpendicular, that is, sail flat as it comes off your fingers.

If you wish to be more artistic, you use the renowned ancient Roman discus throw which is by far the most beautiful delivery of all. Demonstrating this I spun halfway around, turning the pie as I whirled, and let go.

The last one, of course, is the most difficult, and it will take you years to learn to throw like this! For this one is the custard-pie throw that everyone misses with most often. It is really the same sort of overhand throw that the catcher makes to second base from behind the plate. You pull back your arm just as far as it will go, then bring the pie in all of the way from East St. Louis - and let 'er go. You need luck to catch your target square.



The stone profile of Buster Keaton reveals some granitic lines as he ruminates between takes of a Samuel Beckett movie called Film (1965). He was 69.

Appendix. FILM SPEEDS.....

'Q. Why do silent films move so fast? How could audiences of those days have enjoyed them at that speed?

A. So many people are under this misapprehension. Silent films moved no faster than today's, and the action was perfectly normal.²⁷⁵ But they were photographed at a different speed, and required a different speed of projection. When sound came in, the speed had to be changed because of the mechanical problems involved in putting a sound track on the film. Most of today's projection machines (At least, those in theaters and on television) are equipped for sound speed projection only, and that's how the silents have to be shown. It's almost twice as fast as they were originally shown. So be patient next time, and don't blame the speed on the apparent crudity of the day. Silents achieved an astonishingly high degree of technical perfection.

Q. Why are silent films so often blurred and flickery?

A. Again, they weren't. Photography as far back as 1898 was often crystal clear; there are films playing on Broadway now with worse photography than some old biographs of 1909. But with age a film does pick up scratches and tears. Also many silents have been copied four or five times, and are several generations away from the original. A lot of quality is lost each time the process is repeated.' Joe Franklin: Classics of the Silent Screen. 1959?

[The flickery effect is a result of different camera to projection speed. Early films were called 'flickers' because of this effect, which was an oscillation pattern caused by the cameraman not keeping the winding timing steady to projector speed, [cameras were hand wound, projectors had electric motors] hence the need for a great cameraman. When old films, perfectly wound in the first instance, like Buster's, are shown, a very similar oscillation pattern usually occurs, unless the projector is correctly adjusted to the original 'speed of reality'.]

Bruckman was asked:- "What were the actual speeds?"

"This will be a little technical, but here it is. First, remember that all the old speeds were only approximately uniform because the cameras were hand-cranked, not motor-driven. Anyway, old standard speed was sixty feet per minute, which equals sixteen picture frames per second. Comedy speed, or undercranking, was generally about forty-five feet a minute, or twelve frames a second. But in extreme cases it could be as low as thirty feet and eight frames- in other words, exactly one-half as slow as standard. In projection terms that meant action twice as fast as it actually happened. Because, you see, in the theaters the projector speed was fixed at standard and could not be changed.²⁷⁶"

"You say 'old speeds.' Are they different today?

"Sure. Sound made that necessary- to get fidelity. It is now ninety feet a minute. That makes the old comedies even worse as projected today, because the projectors are still not adjustable. Even Keaton's films, done then at standard speed, are now shown fifty percent too fast.²⁷⁷ There are exceptions, of course. At least two places I know of use adjustable projectors. The Museum of Modern Art in New York is one. The George Eastman House in Rochester is another."

²⁷⁵[This is true of all silent movies bar Keystone and other imitative early comedies which were undercranked to give the projected film a faster than reality effect, which was deemed to be funny-looking. This is the effect so often copied in modern attempts at silent film type hilarity, e.g. the execrable work of Benny Hill. Buster's movies never were this way.]

²⁷⁶[This is not 100% correct as some cheaper theaters, to get more shows per day, wound up the rheostat controlling the projector speed.]

²⁷⁷[An average derived from Wead and Lellis' figures quoting sound and silent times for Buster's movies shows that for every 30 minutes at silent speed, there are 20 minutes at sound speed.]

FURTHER ODDMENTS, BY 'INTERESTING' PEOPLE.

Woody Allen.

"'City Lights' and 'The Gold Rush' and 'The Navigator' and 'The General' are four great comedies, aren't they? They have a resonance. Because they're serious. Tati is serious, Comedy is such hard work, isn't it? And maybe it isn't that important." (P. Gilliat. 3/4 face. P.147-8.)

"About Keaton and Chaplin: I think Chaplin is funnier but Keaton is more uncompromising. Keaton's films are Spartan. They're clean and clear and very American. Chaplin is more of a goof-off." (Ditto. 151.)

Diane Keaton. (No relation.)

Who are.. people who've influenced you most in your life? (P.G.)

"Well, now, there's Buster Keaton. I thought he was visually thrilling, and very sophisticated: more about women than about men. He lets you read a lot into things. You're left with so much to decide."

(P.Gilliatt..3/4 Face. P.169.)

Miss Keaton loves her revered actor namesake partly for his poetic and engineering grace, Watching one of his films she feels ungainly...(170-1)

Jeanne Moreau. Sometimes I think how few men there are who love the camera now. They are not astonished to have it in their hands , like Lumiere or Keaton..."P.G.

Henri Langlois 'onlie begetter of the great Cinematique Francaise'..."We must have slapstick for instance, we know these days that it was aesthetically important, but when Keaton was working he was not taken seriously. Keaton suffered because of the bourgeoisie..." Penelope Gilliat (3/4 Face. P.G.)



THE CRITICS. DIGESTED TO MATTERS OF INTEREST TO THIS BOOK.

The thing is too when you're taking peoples critiques, they could be seeing botched up prints, with things left out, scratchy, badly reproduced, so you can't really guarantee unless you *know* they've seen a good clean full-length print, I wouldn't rely too much on their opinion.

1. James Agee,
2. Molly Haskell,
3. Luis Bunuel, included with minor shortening, see Battling Butler chapter 23.

1.] James Agee's 1958 article.

In the language of screen comedians four of the main grades of laugh are the titter, the yowl, the bellylaugh, and the boffo. The titter is just a titter. The yowl is a runaway titter. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure knows all about a bellylaugh. The boffo is the laugh that kills. An ideally good gag, perfectly constructed and played, would bring the victim up this ladder of laughs by cruelly controlled degrees to the top rung, and would then proceed to wobble, shake, wave and brandish the ladder until he groaned for mercy. Then, after the shortest possible time out for recuperation, he would feel the first wicked tickling of the comedian's whip once more and start up a new ladder.

The reader can get a fair enough idea of the current state of screen comedy by asking himself how long it has been since he has had that treatment.....

Buster Keaton hopes to remake at feature length, with a minimum of dialogue, two of the funniest short comedies ever made, one about a porous homemade boat and one about a prefabricated house.²⁷⁸

Buster Keaton started work at the age of three and one-half with his parents in one of the roughest acts in vaudeville ('The Three Keatons'); Harry Houdini gave the child the name Buster in admiration for a fall he took down a flight of stairs. In his first movies Keaton teamed with 'Fatty' Arbuckle under Sennett.[2/3 true.] He went on to become one of Metro's biggest stars and earners; a Keaton feature cost about \$200,000 to make and reliably grossed \$2,000,000. Very early in his movie career friends asked him why he never smiled on the screen. He didn't realize he didn't. He had got into the dead-pan habit in variety; on the screen he had merely been so hard at work it had never occurred to him there was anything to smile about. Now he tried it just once and never again. He was by his whole style and nature so much the most deeply 'silent' of the silent comedians that even a smile was as deafeningly out of key as a yell. In a way his pictures are like a transcendent juggling act in which it seems that the whole universe is in exquisite flying motion and the one point of repose is the juggler's effortless' uninterested face.

Keaton's face ranked almost with Lincoln's as an early American archetype; it was haunting, handsome, almost beautiful, yet it was irreducibly funny; he improved matters by topping it off with a deadly horizontal hat, as flat and thin as a phonograph record. One can never forget Keaton wearing it, standing erect in the prow as his little boat is being launched. The boat goes grandly down the skids and, just as grandly, straight on to the bottom. Keaton never budes. The last you see of him, the water lifts the hat off the stoic head and it floats away.

No other comedian could do as much with the dead pan. He used this great, sad, motionless face to suggest various related things: a one-track mind near the track's end of pure insanity; mulish imperturbability under the wildest of circumstances; how dead a human being can get and still be alive; an awe-inspiring sort of patience and power to endure, proper to granite but uncanny in flesh and blood. Everything that he was and did bore out this rigid face and played laughs against it. When he moved his eyes, it was like seeing them move in a statue. His short-legged body was all sudden, machinelike angles, governed by a daft aplomb. When he swept a

²⁷⁸[These appear not to have got past the flying a kite stage.]

semaphorelike arm to point, you could almost hear the electrical impulse in the signal block. When he ran from a cop, his transitions from accelerating walk to easy jogtrot to brisk canter to headlong gallop to flogged-piston sprint- always floating, above this frenzy, the untroubled, untouchable face- were as distinct and as soberly in order as an automatic gearshift.

Keaton was a wonderfully resourceful inventor of mechanistic gags (he still spends much of his time fooling with erector sets); as he ran afoul of locomotives, steamships, prefabricated and over-electrified houses, he put himself through some of the hardest and cleverest punishment ever designed for laughs. In *Sherlock Jr.*, boiling along on the handlebars of a motorcycle quite unaware that he has lost his driver, Keaton whips through city traffic, breaks up a tug-of-war, gets a shovelful of dirt in the face from each of a long line of Rockette-timed ditch-diggers, approaches a log at high speed which is hinged open by dynamite precisely soon enough to let him through and, hitting an obstruction, leaves the handlebars like an arrow leaving a bow, whams through the window of the shack in which the heroine is about to be violated, hits the heavy feet-first, knocking him through the opposite wall. The whole sequence is as clean in motion as the trajectory of a bullet.

Much of the charm and edge of Keaton's comedy, however, lay in the subtle leverages of expression he could work against his nominal dead pan. Trapped in the side-wheel of a ferryboat, saving himself from drowning only by walking, then desperately running, inside the accelerating wheel like a squirrel in a cage, his only real concern was, obviously, to keep his hat on. Confronted by love, he was not as deadpan as he was cracked up to be, either, there was odd, abrupt motion of his head which suggested a horse nipping after a sugar lump.

Keaton worked strictly for laughs, but work came from so far inside a curious and original spirit that he achieved a great deal besides, especially in his feature-length comedies. (For plain hard laughter his nineteen short comedies- the negatives of which have been lost- were even better.) He was the only major comedian who kept sentiment almost entirely out of his work, and he brought pure physical comedy to its greatest heights. Beneath the lack of emotion he was also uninsistently sardonic; deep below that, giving a disturbing tension and grandeur to the foolishness, for those who sensed it, there was in his comedy a freezing whisper not of pathos but of melancholia. [Ho hum, well, maybe a touch of the Blues.] With the humor, the craftsmanship and the action there was often, besides, a fine, still and sometimes dreamlike beauty. Much of his Civil War picture 'The General' is within hailing distance of Mathew Brady. And there is a ghostly, unforgettable moment in the *Navigator* when, on a deserted, softly rolling ship, all the pale doors along a deck swing open as one behind Keaton and, as one, slam shut, in a hair-raising illusion of noise.

Perhaps because 'dry' comedy is so much more rare and odd than 'dry' wit, there are many who never cared much for Keaton. Those who do cannot care mildly.....

Up to the middle thirties Buster Keaton made several feature-length pictures (with such players as Jimmy Durante, Wallace Beery and Robert Montgomery); he also made a couple of dozen talking shorts. Now and again he managed to get loose into motion, without having to talk, and for a moment the screen would start singing again. But his dark, dead voice, though it was in keeping with his visual character, tore his intensely silent style to bits and destroyed the illusion within which he worked. He gallantly and correctly refuses to regard himself as 'retired.' Besides occasional bits, spots and minor roles in Hollywood pictures, he has worked on summer stages, made talking comedies in France and Mexico and clowned in a French circus. This summer he has played the straw hats in *Three Men on a Horse*. He is planning a television program. He also has a working agreement with Metro. One of his jobs there is to construct comedy sequences for Red Skelton.

[Here Agee goes on to describe W.C.Fields as 'the toughest and most warmly human of all screen comedians...' while falling into the trap of regarding Fields as a sound comedian ONLY, a common error not shared by any silent comedian, including Fields.] Laurel and

Hardy.... have made nothing since 1945 [nor Walt Disney apparently] Preston Sturges and the Marx Brothers are dismissed as has-beens, Jimmy Durante as a 'nightclub genius' [whatever that is] 'Abbott and Costello are semiskilled labor at best' [and extremely laborious viewing to say the least] and...] 'Bob Hope is a good radio comedian with a pleasing presence, but not much more, on the screen. There is no hope that screen comedy will get much better than it is without new, gifted young comedians who really belong in movies, and without freedom for their experiments. [And if they won't let B.K. make movies the way he wants to after making hit movies for 13 solid years, followed by smash box office for a further 4, what hope is there for new comic genius, if any?] For everyone who may appear we have one last, invidious comparison to offer as a guidepost. One of the most popular most recent comedies is Bob Hope's 'The Paleface'. We take no pleasure in blackening 'The Paleface'; we single it out, rather, because it is as good as we've got. Anything that is said of it here could be said, with interest, of other comedies of our time. Most of the laughs in 'The Paleface' are verbal. Bob Hope is very adroit with his lines and now and then, when words don't get in the way, he makes a good beginning as a visual comedian. But only the beginning, never the middle or the end. He is funny, for instance, reacting to a shot of violent whisky. But he does not know how to get still funnier (i.e. how to build and milk) or how to be funniest last (i.e. how to top or cap his gag). The camera has to fade out on the same old face he started with. One sequence is promisingly set up for visual comedy. In it, Hope and a lethal local boy stalk each other all over a cow town through streets which have been emptied in fear of their duel. The gag here is that through accident and stupidity they keep just failing to find each other. Some of it is quite funny. But the fun slackens between laughs like a weak clothesline, and by all the logic of humor (which is ruthlessly logical) the biggest laugh should come at the moment, and through the way, they finally spot each other. The sequence is so weakly thought out that at the crucial moment the camera can't afford to watch them; it switches to Jane Russell. Now we turn to a masterpiece. In The Navigator Buster Keaton works with practically the same gag as Hope's duel. Adrift on a ship which he believes is otherwise empty, he drops a lighted cigarette. A girl finds it.[The girl] She calls out and he hears her; each then tries to find the other. First each walks purposefully down the long, vacant starboard deck, the girl, then Keaton, turning the corner just in time not to see each other. Next time around each of them is trotting briskly, very much in earnest; going at the same pace, they miss each other just the same. Next time around each of them is going like a bat out of hell. Again they miss. Then the camera withdraws to a point of vantage at the stern, leans its chin in its hand and just watches the whole intricate superstructure of the ship as the protagonists stroll, steal and scuttle from level to level, up, down and sidewise, always managing to miss each other by hair's-breadths, in an enchantingly neat and elaborate bit of timing. There are no subsidiary gags to get laughs in this sequence and there is little loud laughter; merely a steadily increasing kind of delight. When Keaton has got all he can out of this fine modification of the movie chase he invents a fine device to bring the two together: the girl, thoroughly winded, sits down for a breather, indoors, on a plank which workmen have left across sawhorses. Keaton pauses on an upper deck, equally winded and puzzled. What follows happens in a couple of seconds at most: air suction whips his silk topper backward down a ventilator; grabbing frantically for it; he backs against the lip of the ventilator; jackknives and falls in backward. Instantly the camera cuts back to the girl. A topper falls through the ceiling and lands tidily, right side up, on the plank beside her. Before she can look more than startled, its owner follows, head between his knees, crushes the topper, breaks the plank with the point of his spine and proceeds to the floor. The breaking of the plank smacks boy and girl together. It is only fair to remember that the silent comedians would have a hard time playing a talking scene as Hope has playing his visual ones, and that writing and directing are as accountable for the failure as Hope himself. But not even the humblest journeyman of the

2.] Excerpts from:- From Reverence To Rape. The Treatment of Women in the Movies. Molly Haskell. Excerpts are in the text with individual films.

They, [Dietrich, Mae West, Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis,] didn't fit the mold and yet they made it anyway, the proud ones, the unconventional ones, the uppity ones. They were bucking the tide in an industry that, like the human race generally, preferred it's women malleable and pleasing to the eye; and that, like men the world over, felt deep down that women should be seen but not heard.²⁷⁹ Like animals, or silent comics (Harpo Marx, Keaton, the silent Chaplin), women are more lovable without the disputatious, ego-defining dimension of speech.....women are the vehicle of men's fantasies,...

Woman is idealized as the 'feminine principle incarnate' by sexual Victorians like Griffith and Chaplin- sometimes out of a hostility that..masquerades as its opposite. Eventually misogyny will out....

Or woman is worshipped as 'mother'- by Ford, Fellini, and other Catholic and crypto-Catholic directors- and thereby kept in her place, inoculated with sanctity against the disease of ambition.

Or she is venerated by European directors like Bergman and Renoir, but as an 'earth goddess,' as an emblem of the natural order; or, for Jean-Luc Godard, as an 'enigma' who would as easily betray as love and whose amoral cruelty inheres in the very quality, the innocence, for which he loves her.

Or she is celebrated and feared as separate-but-equal by American Directors like Keaton and Hawks

.....
Many of the most important stars of the period [the twenties] didn't survive the transition to sound, and our impressions of those who did are based primarily on their work in sound films. The proof of this is that for the longest time- until quite recently, in fact- such supremely talented silent stars as Marion Davies and the sublime Buster Keaton were completely discredited by their sound films, on which their reputations were based.

.....
..and in the twenties... there were a great many female comics of varying types. Although none ever had the sustaining artistic vision of a Keaton or a Chaplin, or even of a Harold Lloyd....

.....
The contradictions in all men- between arrogance and insecurity, between innocence and calculation, between idealism and misogyny- are more apparent in the comedian whose self image is the substance of his art, but, with geniuses like Chaplin and Keaton, they achieve a brief reconciliation and illumination in comic relief.

Again, size was all important. Sharing with many comedians the small frame of the 'weakling,' the little man, Chaplin and Keaton developed wit and ingenuity the way other men develop muscles. In creating their comic personae, they used size as a metaphor for the outsider (Chaplin always more self-pityingly than Keaton). By placing themselves in competition with champion boxers or towering Confederate soldiers, they accentuated the incongruity and multiplied their disadvantages. And they felt their size most keenly when they competed with their rivals for the hand of a girl. She, in turn, was never a 'realistic' partner, with defects like their own, but the most beautiful and exquisite of creatures, a paragon suited, not to the ants of the earth, but to its giants, not to its poets, but to its athletes. Thus they created a situation which could only lead to disappointment, and a woman who, in her blindness to the comedians

²⁷⁹[This may be true of most men, but your editor, being unavoidably male, would like to point out that his understanding is that women are generally more intelligent than men, and he therefore wishes deep down that women were heard more often.]

true values, could only reflect the shallowness and vanity of all women. Like the sadomasochist, the comic- or the idealist/misogynist-creates a woman who will quicken the pulse of his own self-hatred, who will, in her unapproachable perfection, justify his misogyny and, if he is an artist, simultaneously shape and fuel his art. But then, much of the animating spirit of misogyny (indeed, the male anima) is a self-fulfilling prophecy deriving from the particular image of the mother (or any other key female in early life) that predates, and in a sense predetermines, the women who will come to elicit it.

Beside such legendary misogynists as Strindberg and Swift the more gentle Chaplin and Keaton look mild indeed. Yet an excess of reverence for women, which leads, upon disappointment (and it must be disappointed) to profound misogyny, unites them all. Still, to dismiss them as misogynists would be too simple, for their attitude toward women is characterized by anything but undifferentiated hatred. The biographies of Swift, Strindberg, and Chaplin reveal they all were continuously attracted to, obsessed with, and even adored by, women. In the abuse he took from women in life, Chaplin seems more justified in his misogyny than Swift and Strindberg do in theirs, but Chaplin, like the others, and in a peculiar mixture of arrogance and obsequiousness, was driven to seek out the very woman, the 'ideal,' who would end by disappointing him and destroying his illusions.

In their films, built around a romantic female image, Chaplin and Keaton both illuminate the love-hate feelings that lie dormant in most men and show the progression from one to the other. For the idealist to turn misogynist, the princess must turn shrew, a metamorphosis that, for both Chaplin and Keaton, was conveniently represented by the transformation of a woman from sweetheart to wife. Misogyny was cloaked in the acceptably American and automatically comic form of misogamy, the hatred of marriage and, by extension, the wife. In Keaton's *College*, the happily-ever-after ending was ironically undercut by successive shots of the couple with children, the couple grown old, and the headstones of two graves, a startlingly corrosive ending for a romantic comedy. In the *Three Ages*, his spoof of Griffith's *Intolerance*, Keaton introduced the figure of the Amazon; she would crop up, in different forms, in several of his later films. One of the bitterest and funniest comedies on sexual relations ever made is Keaton's uxorious *Seven Chances*. In the first half, the hero endures the supreme social torture of having a marriage proposal whispered from one to another in a roomful of women, and then, when everyone has gotten the word, he is mocked in a chorus of laughter. The same kind of nightmare proliferation turns the second half from funhouse ingenuity into horror, with the beleaguered hero racing down Main Street pursued by a tribe of termagants, a thousand prospective dowager-brides who have responded to an ad for a wife he has placed in the paper. In that one masterstroke of a visual gag, Keaton runs the gamut of male fears-fears of female supremacy, of entrapment by marriage, and of a woman as 'wife,' of the little man pitted against the big woman and dwarfed by her overriding competence, and most of all, of castration.

There is a similar, if more gallant, awe of women in [The] *Balloonatic*, a short film in which Keaton plays a lothario on a back-to-nature trip, living in the wilds and struggling unsuccessfully with fish, bears, the rapids; into his midst, a young woman materializes and overcomes all these difficulties with humiliating ease. The Amazon heroine is offset by the sweetheart, a hardy if foolhardy specimen, who can be counted on to do something enchantingly imbecilic at the crucial moment. In *'The General'* there is the scene (Andrew Sarris has rightly called it 'one of the most glorious celebrations of heterosexual love in the history of the cinema') in which Keaton turns to his girlfriend, who is busily stoking the engine of the train with pieces of wood the size of pencils, makes as if to strangle her, and suddenly changes his mind and kisses her. Keaton is not upset by woman's incompetence; on the contrary, he is alarmed by her competence. In this he perhaps reflects, not only his personal fears, but also those of a period in which women were taking the initiative and threatening the bastions of male supremacy. And yet Keaton was one of the few directors, or artists of any kind, to envision (and envision himself with) both

kinds of women- the soft, feminine dodo, the towering Amazon, and even (in [The] Balloonatic) a soft, feminine Amazon and (in Seven Chances) a towering dodo. Keaton's women (we can almost hear them, like the secret amplified into a roar) rise up in a glorious cacophony of mixed moods and emotions, a testimonial to the tolerance of their creator.

If Chaplin never achieved the sublime equanimity with women that Keaton did, it is perhaps because women were more traumatically crucial to his life and to the ego at the center of his art. Keaton was detached, almost complacent; for him, women, like the elements and the machines with which he achieved rapport, were part of the scheme of things, a technological-sociological-meteorological harmony of parts with which his own motions wondrously synchronized. We hardly know the names of Keaton's actresses, whereas Chaplin's, though not stars in their own right, enjoyed a one-to-one relationship with him and were psychologically central to his stories.....

But Chaplin's idealism is not softened, like Keaton's, by tolerance, and when he reaches out to strangle, he does not change his mind at the last minute.. The virus, so long suppressed, has grown into a monster, the way Keaton's demons multiplied.'



NEGATIVE EVIDENCE. Places where a lack of comment is eloquent.

[One of the pleasures for future collectors of Keatoniana will be, I confidently predict, that there will be only three eras in the history of film where the name of Keaton will be absent, and they are...

A. until 1917, when Keaton appeared in his first film, and

B. from 1935 until, say, 1958.

C. after either Armageddon or global loss of all artistic taste whatsoever, whichever comes soonest. At no other time will the name of Keaton be ignorable, as long as the words Art and Comedy are connected to the word Film. Collecting this section was odd, seeking out absences.]

Max Eastman. *Enjoyment of Laughter*. 1937. A large and learned book that sets out to 'explain all jokes'. While analysing Chaplin, Groucho Marx, W.C.Fields, Mae West, et al, he manages to entirely ignore Keaton, possibly because his 'jokes' are not so glibly explicable. Also Buster sometimes makes jokes that confute his 'Ten Commandments of the Comic Arts'.

Chaplin's 'My Autobiography' manages to ignore Keaton's existence in toto, and also Stan Laurel's, except that Laurel appears both in the index and photo 11 as part of Karno's hockey team, and Keaton, while not appearing in the index, does appear in some editions I have seen in a photo with Chaplin in the dressing room scene from 'Limelight', though he is not mentioned in the caption. Buster doesn't even appear that little in the 1964 first edition I have.

Both books I have found so far on the history of black people in the movies fail to mention Keaton in any way shape or form. From *Sambo to Superspade* is the one I can remember. This in answer to Mr. Moew's criticisms.

A picture book I found, basically pushing the contemporary release of 'Around The World in 80 Days', managed to mention and publish photos of 38 male stars therein without mentioning Keaton.

'The original sound-track score from the Paramount picture, LI'L ABNER. (Filmed in vistavision and technicolor, starring Peter Palmer plus Leslie Parrish. Stubby Kaye. Howard St. John. Julie Newmar. Stella Stevens.) [Who?, I count 51 figures, and no Buster as Lonesome Polecat, though Lonesome Polecat is mentioned second, after, General Bullmoose, on the list of characters, but..... 'What is important is that LI'L ABNER has arrived on the screen as cheerful, tuneful and high-spirited as ever, and that these goings on are wonderfully preserved in this sound track score.' [How does a filmed newspaper cartoon get to be as tuneful as ever?]

COLLECTION OF UNINCLUDED DOUBTFUL QUOTES.

Mainly French. Certainly the voice is not Buster's but the content maybe.

"The first effect should happen at a precise moment; the audience should then be given the chance to get hold of itself, after which the effect should be carried as far as possible, or the scene should progress, depending on the case. There is a kind of mathematical precision to this rhythm, for it is absolutely imperative that the audience feel the full force of the comic incident and await the next funny moment without the slightest feeling of lassitude. The director must be a specialist in the science of rhythm."

"A comic film is put together, you might say, as carefully as the wheels of a watch. The simplest action, performed too quickly or too slowly, can lead to disaster."

('Buster Keaton, Le Metier de faire rire.' in the Anthologie du Cinema by M.Lapierre, Paris, 28 June 1946, P.355. Source, Lebel.P.67)

"Unlike those others (five act dramas) we used no definite manuscript of any kind; we thought up a thin plot which sufficed to enable us to start building scenery; then we set ourselves to thinking of 'gags' (comic ideas and actions) to fit the situations and the settings. When we felt we had 'shot' enough for five or six films, we stopped and assembled what we had; by successive cutting we arrived at the desired film, containing all that was best of the lot." (Source Lebel.P.67.)

"There is no sex, no passion, for the comic actor. When a woman kissed me I became a father to her. I wanted to protect her for the rest of her life." (Statement by Keaton to the interviewer for Cahiers du Cinema, no.86, August 1958, P.29. Photo caption. Source, Lebel. P.94.)



THE POPPYCOCK FILE.

[First, my favourite. The opening two sentences of 'Buster Keaton.' by J.P.Lebel (1964) translated by P.D.Stovin. (1967) A Zwemmer Ltd. London. A.S.Barnes & Co., New York.]

'Buster Keaton, christened Joseph Francis Keaton, was born on his parents' farm in Piqua, Kansas, on October 4, 1895. His parents were of Scottish and Irish descent.'

[No he wasn't. Frank not Francis, no farm, Scottish, Irish, English and German blood, with a dash of indian possibly.

By the time I had read the first page I was irresistibly reminded of Dashiell Hammett...

'I was reading a sign high on the wall behind the bar:

ONLY GENUINE PRE-WAR AMERICAN AND
BRITISH WHISKEYS SERVED HERE.

I was trying to count how many lies could be found in those nine words, and had reached four, with promise of more, when one of my confederates....' from The Golden Horseshoe.

Lebel is untrustworthy at best.]

"Sure it's great, but it's all thirty years too late." B.K. to Lotte Eisner, film historian, after Venice triumph. (Kevin Brownlow. TPGP.P.475.)

That doesn't sound like him either.

It sounds a wee bit sort of..

Bitter! And he was never bitter.

Never?

Well, he was around 1935 for a couple or three years, but not later on.

This is from Peter Evans, from a book called 'Peter Sellers, the mask behind the mask.' It says here, 'Buster Keaton said to me in Paris not long before he died.

"A clown is a fragile flower, treat him kindly."

It sounds highly unlikely to me that Buster would say such a thing. By stretching the imagination he might say it about a baby, but I don't think he would even do that.

"If you add it all up, I would say that Buster drank out of loneliness. Although he was with people, he was a lonely individual, and the deadpan reflected that, in more ways than one." Al Rogell, Director.

I don't think Buster was ever a lonely person. I worked in a film with Al Rogell one time, which Buster had nothing to do with it, out at Universal, but that's the only way I ever knew him, and I don't believe as I remember, that he was necessarily a friend. He worked with Buster and they were acquaintances, but I don't think they were ever friends enough that he could have backed up that statement about Buster being lonely. Their footing was strictly business I think.

'Once O'Connor asked Keaton about a scene in which the little circus kid fills in for his dying father. Returning his gaze, Keaton replied baldly that he had never worked in any circus and that he was 49 when his father died.' Robert Benayoun. (Source, The Look of Buster Keaton. P.138.)

He never made any comment about it.

Is this a true occasion though. Did Keaton tell O'Connor that.

Oh, no. Donald knew that anyway. Knew that already. Before Buster ever got involved with it, when O'Connor first read the script he raised a row about that,

and that was long before they got around to shooting. Buster hadn't even read it at that time, so he didn't know.

Had O'Connor already met Buster when he got the script?

Yeah. We'd met.

Ref Buster Collier claiming to keep an eye on on set safety...HATE***

I'm afraid not. Buster Collier was never a physical thing, he was a light comedian with words and that kind of thing, and I don't think he'd have known anything about helping, or remedying anything that went wrong or anything like that. I don't believe that. I think Buster [Collier] just fantasized about that kind of thing.



METHOD OF COLLECTION:-

to include any and every word Buster said that has been reliably recorded in any way [usually print], shuffling same into chronological order, removing least interesting repeats. [I.E. Where two sentences have the same meaning, the most colorful was chosen. Where two sentences have the same meaning but the least colorful has extra words, those words are added to the most colorful sentence. Every word that could reasonably be kept was kept.] I have punctuated the result as I see fit, usually retaining any printed punctuation. Some few sentences Eleanor, or the facts, repudiated have been removed or corrected, usually due to their being spurious additions. In other words, if it's in, it's true, or verifiable, and the book is structured to be able to easily accept into its scheme any equally true pieces of the story that may come to light. There is a credibility problem involved in the double translation of Buster's idiomatic but densely detailed English, into French, and then back into someone else's English. As a result the vast majority of these have been rejected. Some examples are available above.

WHERE THIS BOOK IS COLLECTED FROM.

LHJ. LADIES HOME JOURNAL ARTICLE. WHY I NEVER SMILE. PUBLISHED JUNE 1926.

[Contains some strange references, mainly due to having to explain his career up to 1926 without mentioning Roscoe Arbuckle, because of the scandal attached to his name. It must have been a miserable job to write, and has also fairly obviously been tampered with in parts. Nonetheless, it must be treated as fairly authentic for 2 reasons.

A.) It contains details not mentioned elsewhere; and
B.) although Buster's speech rhythms seem unusual, they retain certain common characteristics, e.g. ",of course,".
Certain obviously spurious sentences have been rejected with Eleanors say so.]

H.F. HERBERT FEINSTEIN. BUSTER KEATON: AN INTERVIEW.

[A mercifully direct 'Transcript of a tape made for the Pacifica Foundation on October 6, 1960 in Buster's suite at the Clift Hotel, San Francisco, when Buster was performing as King Sextimus in Once Upon a Mattress. ('A man terribly afflicted, yet it's hilarious to everybody that he can't talk.')] Mr. Feinstein is prolix and pedantic in his questions, and I have had to prune him lightly. But we owe him a deep debt of gratitude for being so intent on the theatrical side of Buster's life. He asks, for instance, who Buster's own favorite comedians of all time are; no-one had apparently ever thought to ask him before; and so on. The conversation ensuing makes it nigh impossible to remove Mr. Feinstein, hereafter H.F., at all, let alone completely. So after adding the [much previously pirated] sections devoted to individual films to their places in the text, I have left what's left in 1960, where you get a retrospective conversation about the whole theatrical history of the twentieth, and even the nineteenth century.]

GEORGE PRATT. ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN AND GENERALLY DID. BUSTER KEATON ON HIS SILENT FILM CAREER.

Interviewed in 1958. Published 1974. Image Rochester.
Though this is the last interview I have found, and though not apparently published until '74, snippets of it have been much used by other writers, strangely enough, the least interesting parts. This is a marvelously relaxed interview containing priceless insights and details. It appears to have been somewhat edited, but is essentially verbatim. Mr. Pratt is to be thanked most heartily by posterity. Unfortunately, posterity pays lousy wages.

P.G. PENELOPE GILLIATT.

[In a number of well written and observant articles based on [almost certainly] one interview, shortly before Buster died...Observer Weekend Review, May 24, 1964.. She is an intelligent observer and critic. However, her personal observations have been mainly left out because some are quite obviously pirated from other sources, one specific Buster quote was categorically denied by Eleanor, and there is other hanky-panky, such as retelling a story in a different publication with 'Blacksmith' replacing 'Carpenter' to give the impression of a new quote.]

ANITA LOOS. THE TALMADGE GIRLS A MEMOIR.

[A refreshingly candid account of the personal friendship of Anita with the Talmadge family. Large chunks of Peg Talmadge are included, because

A.) Anita relates Peg's opinions candidly and

B.) because those opinions are as near to the horse's mouth as it seems possible to get.]

Anita was a very close friend of theirs. [the Talmadge family] E.K.

Hedda Hopper: "Peg Talmadge, mother of Norma, Constance and Natalie, was a sweetheart. Anita Loos wrote her book, 'Gentlemen prefer Blondes' from choice bits that fell from the lips of Peg... She ruled with a whim of iron. We all laughed when she said these things but didn't have the wit to write them down. Anita did."

What annoys me about the biographers is that they go off into flights of fancy, and it doesn't come out in the printed word what Buster actually said. They always think they can improve it, like a joke, or a story, they would kill it by improving it instead of printing it the way it was said in the first place.

He was very shy when he's in public round a lot of people that he doesn't know. He feels terribly trapped if he gets around people that mumble, because he doesn't hear too well. I mean, I've known him go through whole interviews and when they leave he says,

"I haven't heard half of what they said."

I don't know why but I've never been able to get him to say, 'Look, speak up.' and tell the man or woman that you can't hear them. This is no great detriment to your male virility or anything else. But he seems to be ashamed of it. And, of course, he hasn't heard properly since 1918, you'd think he'd be used to it by now. This is a condition he got in the first world war.

His main problem with young writers and interviewers that would come in from college or somewhere to interview him, especially in New York and places like that, was that they did no homework. The school says,

"Why don't you go interview Buster Keaton?"

They'd come in with a pencil and they had no idea who he was, and they would ask the stupidest questions. It used to drive him crazy. But then people got terribly profound and artistic with their questions, they'd say

"What was your feeling and your thinking on when you .." did this or that or whatever, ' when you looked at your left hand instead of your right?"

He'd say

"To be funny."

And it would just absolutely stop them. That was his stock answer when he was confronted with stupid interviewers. To *him* they were stupid. He didn't think that way. It's just that in his way of thinking he knew what was funny for him, and he went in and did it. It was no deep-seated motives, thinking, or psychological twists, or any of that kind of thing involved with it *at all*, and he couldn't see any reason why anybody else would think that way.

KEATON. BY RUDI BLESCH. THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BUSTER KEATON- THE STORY OF THE MAN AND HOW HIS FILMS WERE MADE. SECKER & Warburg. London. Published 1966. New York, Macmillan.

The only problem I had with Rudi; he was very thorough, did everything, you know, spent weeks and weeks working with Buster and interviewing everybody in the world; but when Buster would tell him a story, a narrative or a funny story, whatever, by the time it got into print he killed it by improving it. He would print it his own version, which wasn't what Buster said at all, and it wasn't as funny. In a way Charlie Samuels did the same thing but not as much. The difference between those two books was that Rudi Blesh interviewed everyone, the family, the friends, everyone; Charlie Samuels didn't want to speak to anybody but Buster.

Rudi Blesh wrote his biography, and it was much much longer, and he wouldn't allow anybody to touch it. He wouldn't allow it to be edited down. He put it in a trunk and it laid there for ten years. And it was only after Buster died that he agreed to let them edit it, and print it. And by then he called me on the phone and did two chapters at the end. And that did ten years. He wasn't interested in sound pictures, he was only interested in silent pictures.

[Blesh has much detailed information. Oh how I wonder where the audio tapes Blesh recorded are.....]

MY WONDERFUL WORLD OF SLAPSTICK. BY BUSTER KEATON (WITH CHARLES SAMUELS.) PUBLISHED 1960. NEW YORK, DOUBLEDAY.

[All included, which makes this book a massively extended version of My Wonderful World of Slapstick. We owe Mr. Samuels the deepest debt of all for his single minded focus on a first person account from the horse's mouth. Excerpts from MWWS lack some or many of the colloquialisms and speech rhythms normally evident in Buster's oral commentary, I suspect that they have been heavily edited and find it hard to accept them as direct quotes, pending your comments..]

I had the same feeling when you were reading it just now. He embellished it, and put it into proper English, more than Buster would have done.

He [Samuels] never talked to anybody. He didn't even talk to me. And he and Buster would go off by themselves up in the room, and they'd talk and he'd take it right on the typewriter. That's the way he always worked. But he never asked a question of anybody else. I mean, socially, that's another story. We were in Las Vegas working, and he was there for eight weeks, and he and Buster would work together all day every day, and then afterwards he came and stayed at our house for three weeks. And we were together all the time, but he never asked me a question. He didn't want to know anybody's opinion. It worked out being more autobiographical [than Blesh] because Buster was actually speaking at all times himself. It might not have been his speech rhythms, but at least it was his opinion and no-one else's, of whatever it happened to be.

Buster's telling of stories changed slightly? I guess he just gets bored with saying the same things over and over, and he'd change it to keep himself amused as much as anything, I presume. I would.²⁸⁰

²⁸⁰[This answers a question about apparent discrepancies, but most later proved to be perfectly in harmony. Buster is remarkably consistent, due to his frankness, and the nearer I got to a final edit, the less this problem remained. Finally I had only three or four unimportant stories with very minor inconsistencies in them, as noted at their place in the text.]

**TOM DARDIS. KEATON, THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T LIE DOWN
PUBLISHED 1979. ANDRE DEUTSCH LTD., LONDON. NEW YORK,
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS.**

Dardis was a royal pain.

First of all I don't think he was a very good writer, but the main thing that became very obvious to me about Dardis was that his focus, and his interest, was money and drinking. Dardis started out as an editor, and the first thing that he wrote was 'Sometime In The Sun', it was bio's on five different writers, Faulkner... Dardis never made a dime in his life as an editor, he made a living, period. He also was a dried out alcoholic who had been on the wagon for a good many years. And when you read these other ones, James Agee, and the others that he did, the total focus on all of those stories was drinking and money, how much money they made, how much money they lost, etcetera. And he did the same thing with the Keaton Biography. That's all he was interested in.

He made three trips out here. I figured when I got all round to reading his book, I had spent six weeks with that man, like all day, a week here a week there, altogether it got to be six weeks, talking to him, and there was nothing in there that I had had to say. Whatever questions he asked he answered in his own way, I might as well have stayed home and forgotten it. And money and drinking was all he was interested in, so that, basically, is what I found fault with; plus the fact that he had so many mistakes it was unbelievable. He would change everything around to suit himself. So I never trusted anything he said about anybody, because that was his only interest, those two subjects. According to him, no film of Buster's ever made any money. Well, Joe Schenck was not a stupid man, if his films were not making money he wouldn't have continued to make them. Of course, Dardis never knew Buster, Dardis only talked to me, and everybody else.

[One interesting thing arising out of finding all the individual interviews is that I have got various sources playing fast and loose with each other. Dardis is particularly naughty, and as a result, wherever I found a comparable quote in any other source than Dardis, I chose the other unless it was obviously taken from Dardis; but more usually because Dardis has edited the other himself anyway. However, there is still much in Dardis that is irreplaceable, and I can only envy him the breadth of his access for personal research, while still aware of how many chances he missed to elucidate further.

Eleanor was his main source, and you can see above what she thought. Even his preface is thoroughly misleading. Dardis is the biographer who insists Buster was abused both on and off stage by his father, and though this *could possibly* be true, he gives no idea where he got his authority to say so. Buster never did, at least, not to anything like the level Dardis insists upon.

Chapter One, for instance, is full of disbelief in Buster's recall, and written in a tone suitable for a scandal sheet:- 'It is more than likely that many of these marvelous stories were apocryphal.' 'There are a number of equally miraculous events that reportedly took place...' 'The most action-packed story of all is said to have taken place...' These all about stories Buster himself relates as fact.

And as to the mistakes Eleanor refers to, they are lulu's and legion and in many cases it is quite clear he doesn't understand the specific story he's writing about. Dardis is so slapdash with facts that his book may be described as the definitively inaccurate biography of Buster Keaton. I have been forced to deal with Dardis as a hostile witness, and to thoroughly crosscheck [where possible] every quote used. Further, I have been forced to leave the source marking in because nearly all the figures are his, and make no real sense. There are possible explanations:

A. Dardis is lying when he says he got his figures from the books of the Keaton Company, and he just made them up. This I do not believe.

B. Dardis is being misled, and all he has are the books prepared for the taxman, designed to conceal the huge profits that quite obviously were made, despite Dardis's insistence to the contrary. Therefore there is another set of books potentially discoverable, maybe.

C. The books Dardis saw contained only the profits from America, but conceal the foreign take. This is possible.

D. Joe Schenck was such a crazy nepotist that he allowed Buster to throw money down the toilet for seven solid years simply for being a brother-in-law. This I also do not believe.

E. Well, around about here we start getting into little green men territory.

In support of explanation B. and or C. we have Buster refusing percentages in favor of bonuses from Nick Schenck at MGM on the grounds that he knows 'from nothing about their book keeping'. We have Joe Schenck's recorded equanimity on being jailed for tax fraud, which equanimity, it well might be suggested, could be due to a certain knowledge of other much larger sums undiscovered. And lastly we have the box office: the average weekly movie audience in America in 1926 was 50 million; in 1927, 57 million; in 1928, 65 million; in 1930, 90 million; 1931, 75 million; in 1932 and 33, 60 million. Taking into account the weekly attendance never reached 90 million again until 1945-1948, and then dropped steadily until by 1980 it came down to 19,600,000, we may view the period 1925-33 as a golden age at the box office. In other words, the weekly cash intake at cinemas over the main years of Buster's career was colossal. Taking into account statistics that suggest the vast majority of people do not consider incorrect tax declaration immoral, what would you say would be the likelihood of B and or C above being correct?]

I never believed those Dardis figures either. First of all, all of Buster's films that he made even in his own studio, they either made very little money, or none, according to Dardis. Well, if that occurred, Joe Schenck was a smart businessman, he wouldn't have continued making films for years. He would have gotten rid of Buster and closed the studio, if he was gonna not make money, or lose, and the way Dardis writes it, that's what was happening.

I feel that we have to very thoroughly discredit Dardis as a source, Uhuh.

KEVIN BROWNLOW. THE PARADES GONE BY. 1969. NEW YORK, ALFRED A. KNOFF.

[All Buster quotes included. An essential, fascinating and vital piece of work. Sensible questions asked in plenty and relayed in Buster's words. A highly recommended buy for anyone with any interest in early Hollywood.]

CHRISTOPHER BISHOP. AN INTERVIEW WITH BUSTER KEATON. FILM QUARTERLY. FALL '58.

[All Buster quotes included. Probably the most pirated source in the entire canon. A fascinating and apparently totally verbatim piece of work. Vital and essential.]

ARTHUR B. FRIEDMAN. BUSTER KEATON: AN INTERVIEW. 1958. FILM QUARTERLY. V. 1. NO. 1.

[All Buster quotes included. Another vital and essential piece of work, mercifully verbatim.]

BETTY HARPER RUSSEL. MABEL.

[Another highly recommended read. A fascinating biography of a divine but flawed and damaged comedienne. Chosen for the Arbuckle trial due to its lack of connection to Buster and Roscoe, and its plain spoken savvy. Likewise:-

MOLLY HASKELL. 'FROM REVERENCE TO RAPE. THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN THE MOVIES.'

[I have tried to include a sampling of review throughout. Molly Haskell is the reviewer I started with, my review bible if you like. Often she is the only reviewer to even mention the issues in such a way that I can be 100% percent certain I'm watching the same film. She is also the only one of the critics whose opinions of Buster's work coincide with my own feelings. I'm allowed to show favoritism if I like, so I did.]

HATF. A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW. 3 HOUR TV LIFE STORY. 1989.

[Fully authorized by Eleanor.

Though full of direct interview with Buster, it also contains a number of peoples opinions in the poppycock file.]

Audio interviews from HATF obtained from:-

Joan S. Franklin

Prof. H.C.V.Feinstein. San Francisco Uni. See above.

Prof. Arthur B. Friedman.

George C. Pratt. George Eastman House.

Studs Terkel.

Tony Thomas.

Film Sources:-

Rohauer Collection.

Fletcher Markle interview. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Harold Casselton and Ted Larson.

Turner Entertainment Co.

UCLA Film and Television Archive.

David Wyatt Collection.



LIST OF BEST COMPANION VOLUMES TO THIS ONE.

Six books for fans and scholars alike...

KEVIN BROWNLOW. THE PARADE'S GONE BY.

SECKER AND Warburg LTD. 1968.

A delightful and informative overview of the development of Hollywood and the silent era, almost certainly the best introduction to the subject yet published. The title derives from an interview with Monte Brice. 'Brice, who had been a writer and director of silent comedies, told me of the time he watched the shooting of The Buster Keaton Story, ...

'They had it all wrong. I tried to tell them that things weren't like that in the twenties, but they wouldn't listen. I remember the assistant, a young guy. He said to me, 'Look, why don't you go away? Times have changed. You're an old man. The Parade's gone by...' '

DANIEL MOEWS. KEATON THE SILENT FEATURES CLOSE UP.

BERKELEY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1977.

University of California Press. Berkeley. Los Angeles. London.
For those who cannot see the films, this is the best book there is, recounting faithfully all the action of the features, excluding 'Three Ages' and all MGM product. Mr. Moews is both insightful and sensible. His book is de rigeur for any Keaton fan without a full collection of the Features. Would that he had written 'The Silent Two-reelers Close Up.'

That said, one criticism must be mentioned with reference to Mr Moews allegations of racism in some of Buster's minor character chase gags, some extended scenes, and a few vignettes. I think Buster would have said, 'Well, that's the wrong way to look at it from the theadical viewpoint.' There is a widespread tendency to apply movies to the logic of real life. Movie comedy is based upon the comedy of real life, but is not a true depiction of real life, or in a nutshell, it is fiction and has no relevance, necessarily, to non-fiction. Where this applies to Mr. Moew's allegations of racism ['College.' etc,] is this. I had watched the films and noticed no such thing. In 'The Navigator' for instance; where I had seen a handsome couple, full of life, verve, youth, and happiness [in comparison to the deadness of Buster's demeanour as Rollo Treadaway,] Mr. Moews describes the African American 'Just Married' couple, as, '...the grinning bride and groom in their jalopy limousine, a low black parody of a rich white man's wedding,...' And when I cross checked I found I am not alone in not noticing this, and other things he finds racist. They complied with the basic rule of Buster's films, they could have happened in real life. Buster's films are, I maintain, the best view on film of the period in which they were made, the towns and locations make Buster's modern dress comedy our historical comedy, they could have happened in the year they were made, but they no longer could. Those places are gone, those people on the street, dressed as everyone was, living in a society bounded by totally different rules and manners, all these can only be fairly judged within the reality of the period in which they were filmed, and not by the standards of a later age. That is not to excuse the racism (not to mention sexism) clearly apparent in the work of many film-makers of the period, only to say that I don't believe there is much, if any evidence of it in Buster's films. Pending a definitive work on the subject by an expert in the field, which I definitely am not, I vote that Mr. Moews is incorrect, I believe that he sees an intention and an implication which quite simply is not intended, or depicted, quite as he sees it, or at the very least not all of it.

With this criticism made, I heartily recommend this book. Every Buster fan needs this one.

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THE LOOK OF BUSTER KEATON. ROBERT BENAYOUN. LONDON, PAVILLION BOOKS LTD. 1984.

Quite simply the best collection of photographs yet printed. Also contains an enthusiastic text that makes a number of sometimes strange but usually accurate, and always thought provoking connections between Buster's work and the wider artistic culture of this century. No other writer has been so completely enamoured of Buster, or so immersed in his look.

KEATON. RUDI BLESCH. NEW YORK, MACMILLAN, 1966.

The only major biography to have access to Buster, and his family. There is much matter in his book that almost certainly came directly from the horse's mouth, but which I cannot honestly include in this book without access to his original tapes. The problem is that Mr. Blesch has a very distinct opinion about the way things *should* have happened, and a determination that his way of viewing the subject is the correct one. As a result, some of the stories he tells appear unlikely when compared to the body of direct quotation collected here. This is not to say they are definitely spurious, just that I find them doubtful enough to require that the reader make up their own mind. Therefore you have no choice but to read Blesch's book.

THE FILM CAREER OF BUSTER KEATON. GEORGE WEAD AND GEORGE LELLIS.

REDGRAVE PUBLISHING COMPANY.
Pleasantville, New York.

Contains a [not totally accurate but thoroughly sensible] synopsis of all the shorts, and features, up to and including 'Spite Marriage', and an unrivalled index of 'Writings about Buster Keaton' from 1920 until 1977, and a long list of 'Performances and Other Related Activity from 1917 until 1972'. Without Mr. Wead and Mr. Lellis as a secondary starting point [my own lifelong fixation and collection being the first] this book would have taken years longer to produce, and it took long enough in all conscience. My heartfelt thanks go to them with a large dose of admiration. In fact, it may be treated as the main index to this book. Someone should do a sequel. Indispensable.

THE DAY THE LAUGHTER STOPPED. DAVID YALLOP.

HODDER AND STOUGHTON. 1976. REVISED AND UPDATED CORGI EDITION, 1991. At 373 pages (excluding filmography and index) many people may not care to read a whole book to add to their understanding of chapter sixteen in this book. But Mr. Yallop tells the tragic tale of Roscoe's victimisation with clarity and dignity, backed by a veritable mountain of research. In my opinion he deserves a medal for his clear eyed exposure of the simple truths still, sadly, hidden behind the public hysteria about the case. As I have mentioned, nearly everyone I have asked who knows Arbuckle's name has a vile version of the story which is absolutely untrue. Further, many modern books still stubbornly adhere to the lies of Maude Delmont. Though it is a sobering and very uncomfortable read, it also represents a huge chunk out of Buster's otherwise happy life. The imagination staggers even beginning the attempt to understand what it must have felt like to have your best friend thus unjustly publicly crucified. Buster never spoke about it that much, probably because:
A. almost no-one in Hollywood believed it for a moment, and
B. publicity people wanted the story forgotten, and
C. probably it was intensely painful, and
D. no-one ever asked him.

Buster is clear, but firmly polite on the subject, even about those who had no right to expect any such consideration. I would prefer that it had never happened, but facts must be faced. Therefore, even though it is a discomfortable experience, Yallop's book is, in truth, required reading, if only for the insight it gives

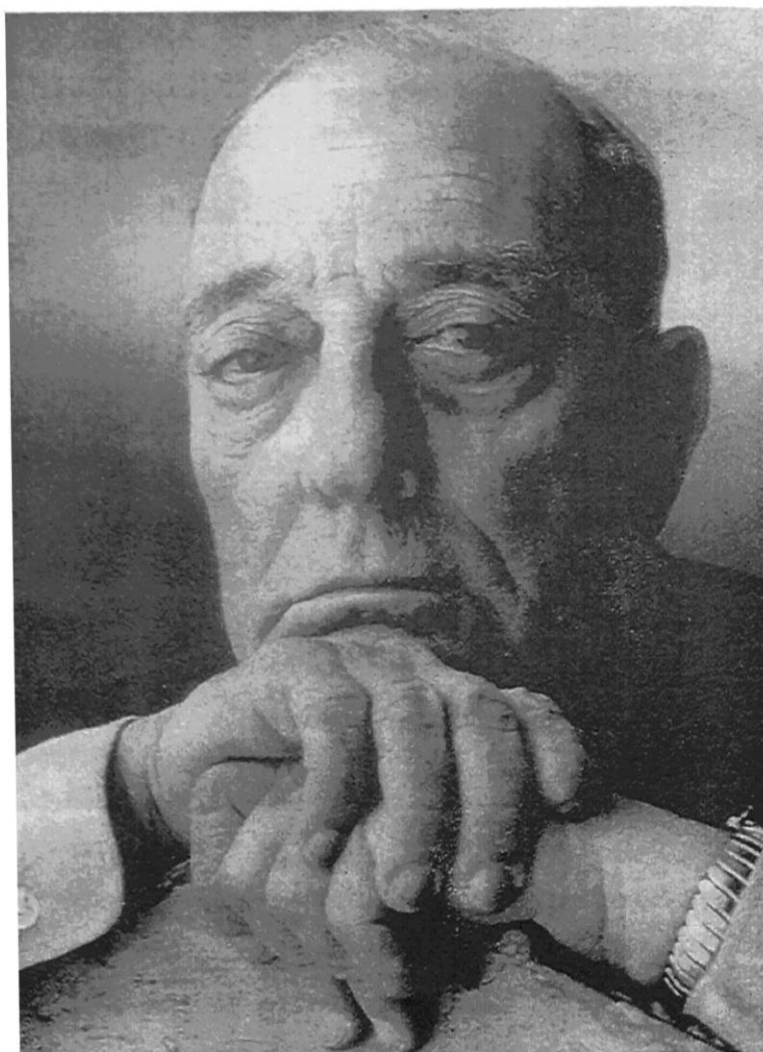
into American society at the period, caught in a hideously ugly light. As a reward for their effort readers get 114 pages of Arbuckle's biography preceding the unpleasantness at the St. Francis Hotel, and a fascinating peek into the film industry immediately preceding Buster's entry into it.



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[These bibliographies are of necessity shortened, especially this one. My policy for nigh twenty years has been to read any and every book, magazine article, etc. with any possible Keaton connection. Further, where an indexless book might have mentioned him, e.g. a contemporary biography, I read it. I also tried to find cross and double checks on every arguable point and fact using various libraries. This means that many hundreds of books and magazines have passed through my hands in the making of this one, making it futile to list them all, not to mention dull and impossible.]

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FILMOGRAPHY.

S. Keaton Stars

D. Keaton directs, to all intents and purposes

A. Keaton appears in a major non-starring role

B. Keaton appears in a bit part

R. Keaton appears in a small role

C. Keaton in part mainly or totally cut out

(contains description or name of role, where known and describable).

U. Keaton works on movie in uncredited capacity

T. Keaton as technical director

W. Written by Keaton

CW. Co-written by Keaton.

1. 2. etc. Number of reels. 2-reelers vary between as short as 15 minutes to as long as 35.

F. Feature length, exact reel number not known to me.

Sh. Short film, exact reel number not known to me.

N. Never released

P. No known prints

*. Editor has seen and studied in the last 3 years

0. Editor saw in 1970.

K. Editor has studied the Kino Video print, March, 1995. See Kino Review.

If unmarked otherwise, I've never seen it

?. * Probably, maybe, or I don't know.

All compilation movies ignored. All dates year of release.

1917.

The Butcher Boy. 2. A. (Village pest) *

A Reckless Romeo. 2. P. A. (rival)

The Rough House. 2. P. A.

His Wedding Night. 2. P. A.

Oh Doctor. 2. P. A

Fatty at Coney Island. 2. A. (husband) *

A Country Hero. 2. P. A.

1918

Out West. 2. A. (dude gambler)

The Bell Boy. 2. A. (village pest)

Moonshine. 2. A. (assistant revenue agent)

Good Night, Nurse! 2. A. (doctor/visitor)

The Cook. 2. P. A. (waiter/helper)

1919

Back Stage. 2. P. A. (stagehand)

The Hayseed. 2. A. (helper)

1920

The Garage. 2. A. (mechanic)

One Week. 2. CW. D. S. (newlywed) *

Convict 13. 2. CW. D. S. (dreamer) *

The Saphead. 7. S. (Bertie the lamb)

The Scare Crow. 2. CW. D. S. (suitor) *

Neighbours. 2. CW. D. S. #. K.

1921

The Haunted House. 2. CW. D. S. (bank clerk) *. K.

Hard Luck. 2. CW. P. D. S.

The High Sign. 2. CW. D. S. *

The Goat. 2. CW. D. S. #

The Play House. 2. CW. D. S. (dreamer, stage-hand, audience, orchestra, et al) *

The Boat. 2. CW. D. S. (husband) *

1922

The Paleface. 2. CW. D. S. (butterfly collector) *

Cops. 2. CW. D. S. *

My Wife's Relations. 2. CW. D. S. #

The Blacksmith. 2. CW. D. S. (blacksmith's assistant) *

The Frozen North. 2. CW. D. S. (Dreamer) #. K.

The Electric House. 2. CW. D. S. #

Day Dreams. 3. CW. D. S. #

Screen Snapshots. 1. ?

1923

The Balloonatic. 2. CW D. S. *. K.

The Love Nest. 2. W. D. S. (dreamer) *
 Three Ages. 6. D. S. #
 Our Hospitality. 7. D. S. *
 1924
 Sherlock Junior. 5. D. S. #. (projectionist/detective) K.
 The Navigator. 6. D. S. (millionaire) #
 1925
 Seven Chances. 6. D. S. (partner in a failing business) #. K.
 Go West. 7. CW. D. S. (vagrant) #&*
 1926
 Battling Butler. 7. D. S. (millionaire) #. K.
 1927
 The General. 8. CW. D. S. (engineer) *
 College. 6. D. S. (student) #
 1928
 Steamboat Bill, Jr. 7. D. S. (student) *
 The Cameraman. 8. CD. S. (street photographer) *
 1929
 Spite Marriage. 9. CD. S.
 The Hollywood Revue of 1929. A. (oriental dancer) *
 The Voice of Hollywood. 1. ?
 1930
 Free and Easy. F. S. (Elmer Butts) *
 Doughboys. F. S. (Elmer Stuyvesant) *
 1931
 Parlor, Bedroom and Bath. F. S. (Reginald Irving) *
 Sidewalks of New York. F. S. (Tine Harmon)
 The Stolen Jools. 2. R. *
 1932
 The Passionate Plumber. F. S. (Elmer Tuttle)
 Speak Easily. F. S. (Prof. Timoleon Zanders Post)
 1933
 What! No Beer?. F. S. (Elmer J. Butts)
 1934
 Le Roi des Champs Elysees. F. S. (Buster Garnier/ Jim le Balafre)
 The Gold Ghost. 2. S. (Wally)
 Allez Oop. 2. S. (Elmer)
 1935
 Palooka from Paducah. 2. S. (Jim)
 One-Run Elmer. 2. S. (Elmer) *
 Hayseed Romance. 2. S. (Elmer) *
 Tars and Stripes. 2. S. (Elmer) *
 The E-Flat Man. 2. S. (Elmer)
 The Timid Young Man. 2. S. (Elmer)
 1936
 The Invader. F. S. Based on Keaton idea. (Leander Proudfoot) *
 Three on a Limb. 2. S. (Elmer)
 Grand Slam Opera. 2. W. D? S. (Elmer) *
 Blue Blazes. 2. S. (Elmer)
 The Chemist. 2. S. (Elmer)
 Mixed Magic. 2. S. (Elmer)
 La Fiesta de Santa Barbara. 2. ?. (One of several stars)
 1937
 Jail Bait. 2. S. (Elmer)
 Ditto. S. (Elmer)
 Love Nest on Wheels. 2. S. (Elmer)
 1938
 Life in Sometown, U.S.A. 1. D.
 Hollywood Handicap. 1. D.
 Streamlined Swing. 1. D.
 1939
 Hollywood Cavalcade. F. Keaton apparently directed his scenes. S. *.
 Pest from the West. 2. S. (traveler)
 Mooching through Georgia. 2. S. (Civil War veteran)
 The Jones Family in Hollywood. F. CW.
 The Jones Family in Quick Millions. F. CW.
 1940
 The Villain Still Pursued Her. F. R.
 Li'l Abner. F. R. (Lonesome Polecat)
 Nothing but Pleasure. 2. S. (holidaymaker)

Pardon My Berth Marks. 2. S. (reporter)
 The Taming of the Snood. 2. S. (innocent accomplice)
 The Spook Speaks. 2. S. (magician's housekeeper)
 His Ex Marks the Spot. 2. S.
 1941
 So You Won't Squawk. 2. S.
 General Nuisance. 2. S.
 She's Oil Mine. 2. S.
 1943
 Forever and a Day. F. R. (plumber)
 1944
 San Diego, I Love You. F. R. (bus driver)
 1945
 That's the Spirit. F. R. (Angel running Heaven's complaints dept.)
 That Night With You. F. R.
 1946
 God's Country. F. R.
 El Moderno Barba Azul. F. S. N in US. (Prisoner sent to moon)
 1949
 The Lovable Cheat. F. R. (suitor)
 In the Good Old Summertime. F. R. (Hickey)
 You're My Everything. F. R. (butler)
 1950
 Sunset Boulevard. F. B. (bridge player) *
 Un Duel a Mort. 2?. D?. S. (duellist)
 1952.
 Paradise for Buster. 2. S.
 1953
 Limelight. F. B. (musichall pianist) *
 L'incantevole nemica. F. R. N in US. ?.
 1956
 Around the World in 80 Days. F. B. (train conductor) #
 1960
 The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. F. B. (lion tamer)
 The Devil to Pay. 2. S.
 1962
 Ten Girls Ago. F. N. R.
 1963
 It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World. F. C. (Jimmy the Crook) *
 1964
 Pajama Party. F. R. (Indian chief)
 1965
 Beach Blanket Bingo. F. R. (surfer)
 How to Stuff a Wild Bikini. F. R. (Bwana)
 Sergeant Deadhead. F. A. (Private Blinken)
 The Railroad. 2. S. *
 Buster Keaton Rides Again. 2. S. (himself) *
 Film. 2. S. (Object/Eye)
 1966
 A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. F. R. (Erronius) *
 The Scribe. S.
 1967
 War Italian Style. 2. F. R. (Rommel)

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Afterword.

The book in your hands is the product of 24 years of frustration. At eighteen I attended a Buster Keaton Film Festival, starting with 'Our Hospitality' and the short, 'The Playhouse'. I was hooked instantly. I did my best to see all the films on the programme, and was fully satisfied with the cinematic value for money received. I found the features to be engrossing stories, creditably acted and very gripping, and the shorts fascinatingly inventive. And of course, they were funny. Further, I found they left an indelible taste in my mind. I very much wanted to see them all again, and so began my frustration.

For many years I could not see any of them again, and since then, only some and only occasionally, even since video seemed to make it an easy possibility. So while I was waiting I attempted to quell my frustration somewhat by reading all the books that have been written about him. Sad to say this only increased my frustration. For a start they all reduce to last thirty years of his life to a mere afterthought, as if this part of a biography were unimportant. Secondly it soon became clear that the man portrayed in one could not be the same man as that portrayed by another. Buster's own 'My Wonderful World of Slapstick' was lots of fun, but very reticent on some things, and totally absent in some areas. All other writers seemed to impose their own personality upon the subject. Finally I got fed up with the whole thing and started collecting all the interviews Buster gave, etcetera, into chronological order. Then I got permission from Buster's widow to finish the job by editing the result as I saw fit, including permission to interview her at length to cover all the missing bits of the story, as far as her knowledge allowed. Every part of this work has been approved and checked by her. This book is the result. If I have any frustration remaining at all, it is that the interviewers of Buster all asked essentially the same questions, so where many aspects of some films and particular stunts are covered copiously, some films, e.g. 'Battling Butler' are hardly touched upon. Even so, this is the book I was looking for when first I went looking for a biography of Buster Keaton. It is in fact his autobiography. As far as I am aware no other biography has ever been collated in this way, that is, without a narrative inserted by the biographer, including interpretations of the subject's personality and motivations which the author usually has *no right to infer, let alone put forward as fact*. I have avoided this as much as possible and I have also avoided inserting my opinion into the text throughout the book.

As to Buster's importance as a cinematic artist, or even as a low comedian, I feel it to be patently clear that there is no similar cinematic achievement to compare it with. It is unique, and an art treasure so far ahead of the competition that it will always be relevant to the cinematic arts. Though I would rather be able to offer you the complete works of Buster Keaton on video [at the correct speed and with the whole frame], all I have to offer you is this book.

I hope you like it.

Oliver Lindsey Scott. [A.K.A. Elmer] September 17, 1994. Christchurch. New Zealand.

Final correction, May 28, 1995. Cambridge, U.K.

Well, that's how it would have ended, but the very wonderful Kino Video International have had the good sense and good taste to release all Buster's self produced movies, and a rare treat it is too. To be quite frank, after the thousands of hours work in this book and the

25 years since last I saw many of the movies, added to the fact that various copies of some of the films that I had managed to obtain were in an awful state, I had begun to wonder if Buster Keaton really was as great as I decided he was all those years ago. Thanks to Kino I can happily report that Buster is all that I remembered. Despite the popularity and fame of *The General*, it was my belief, now renewed, that Buster made at least seven great features, *Our Hospitality*, *Sherlock Junior*, *The Navigator*, *Battling Butler*, *Seven Chances*, *Steamboat Bill Junior* and *The General*. The remainder fall only slightly below the standard set by the foregoing, *Go West*, as Buster says, because the finale is slightly unsuccessful, *College* because the premise is slightly formulaic, and *Three Ages* simply because it is a travesty and cannot, and indeed should not, be taken seriously in any way. At MGM *The Cameraman* comes even closer to greatness than *Go West*, failing only because it is slightly too long, *Spite Marriage* I cannot comment on as I have only seen snippets.

Let us turn to the Kino prints, features first. Firstly, though slightly damaged in places, *THREE AGES* is a truly satisfying entertainment, indeed it is somewhat more successful as such than *Intolerance* which it parodies. This is in large part because we follow the same characters in the different eras, in *Intolerance* the characters are different in each era, so where in *Intolerance* we watch four stories spliced together to culminate in history rushing across the screen, in *Three Ages* we follow the same characters in the same situations and the historical setting is just that. The result is that the intercut stories give the film a more cohesive feel than *Intolerance*. It is a lighthearted, witty and refreshingly simple movie marred only by the wooden 'acting' of the heroine about whom it is hard to care. This minor criticism aside it is enormous fun to watch. Buster's modesty in this book shows itself [yet again] in that the spear vault mentioned is achieved from horseback up to a balcony, no mean feat; but then, if one started mentioning individual stunts one would need a book of far greater length than this. It is strange that while some stunts are famous [e.g. the waterfall rescue in *Our Hospitality*] others have gone unmentioned even where they are as amazing and dangerous [e.g. being dragged on a rope by a train in the same movie]. Why this should be so is beyond my wit, and I can only recommend you see the films for yourself.

OUR HOSPITALITY is a gem. The historical authenticity is effortlessly maintained, and the charm of Stephenson's Rocket added to the charm of Buster and his dog is irresistible. The story is dramatic, gripping and totally believable, and as usual very funny. Even though to start with I had to force myself to watch the Kino print as I had watched the film at least fifteen times in the previous two years, I soon found myself swept away by its many virtues, especially its narrative directness and constantly maintained tension. It is that great rarity, a truly comic period drama, and apart from *The General*, as such in a class of its own. That it should be the first attempt at a full length feature story by a two-reeler director is startling. Buster's portrayal is consistently fascinating, and the whole movie works effortlessly.

The kino print is clear and perfectly watchable with an above average musical score.

SHERLOCK JUNIOR is a masterpiece pure and simple. The breadth of its cinematic implications are fully as wide as all the previous commentators suggest. The prolonged dream sequence is astonishing, and all the virtues Buster brings to bear on movie making are here in extraordinary abundance. The Kino print is very good. Special mention must be made of an imaginative score by The Club Foot Orchestra who have worked extremely hard to give musical life to the visual cornucopia with an abnormally large measure of success.

THE NAVIGATOR is as good as the box office returns suggest, a remarkably fine and witty piece. Many times I found myself wishing various situations went on longer, especially the kitchen and underwater sequences. For my taste it could be half an hour longer. The situation is a pip, and Kathryn McGuire is a fine foil to Buster. If most movies were half this good there'd never be empty cinemas. After a slightly shaky start the kino print is good and the score is fine.

SEVEN CHANCES is both simpler and more complicated than *The Navigator*. Simpler in premise, more complex in implication. It faces the knotty problem of sexuality in a social context, while forcing the audience to face ageism and ugliness at the same time. It is hard to understand Buster's dislike of the movie. At its period it must have been [from my viewing] an unusually adult movie, which it remains, and while the basic plot premise is not quite up to Keaton's own norm, even so the film works on many levels, especially as action comedy. For modern tastes the one annoyance is the stock theatrical blackface comedy servant, but his part is mercifully small. The Kino print is excellent, but the score, in my opinion, only adequate, not that that spoils my enjoyment in the slightest.

GO WEST, Buster's movie about alienation, friendship and loyalty, is both funny, poignant and disturbing. Had the last ten minutes worked without the necessity for episodic comedy 'bits' and a touch of undercranking for the stampede it would have been a good bet to be another *Navigator*, that is, a triumph. What with the Western locale [who could resist Buster as a cowboy riding the world's largest mule? or politely raising his hat to a cow?] and all the usual Keaton cinematic virtues it should have been as satisfying as *The General*, but as it stands we have a still way above average entertainment. The Kino print is excellent and the score is fine, though the occasional lost frame seems to affect the soundtrack similarly. Even so, the result is still excellent.

BATTLING BUTLER fully justifies the box office enthusiasm that followed its release. The partnership of Buster and Snitz Edwards is particularly pleasing. It is deceptively smooth on the surface, but the undertones verge on the sinister, making what is apparently just another dramatic/romantic comedy from the now practised Buster Keaton studios a film with great depth of relevance. It could be viewed as a dissertation on the social encouragement of violence, and Ronald is Buster's most anti-violent hero barring only *Steamboat Bill Junior*. Stripped of any serious intent it is a wildly funny movie by anyone's standards, and by Buster's own standards this is about as good as it gets. Why it should be so much less famous [at this point in history] than *The General* is entirely beyond me. The Kino print is so good that when the last reel shows slight damage it is almost a shock. The score was quite acceptable.

I have not yet received the remaining three Kino videos containing **THE GENERAL**, **COLLEGE**, and **STEAMBOAT BILL JUNIOR**, but the first and last are both masterpieces, and *College* is thoroughly excellent entertainment.

Kino have also offered us a unique opportunity to judge for ourselves why *THE SAPHEAD* was so popular. While it is not directed by Buster, which shows in the static quality of the staging and the larger number of title cards, it is still a very interesting movie to watch. The plot is perfectly serviceable, and the general ambience, casting and staging are excellent. But the main interest is Buster's performance as Bertie Van Alstyne, which, shorn as it is of the plethora of stunts that we would expect in one of Buster's own films, not to mention that he is here not the boss, gives us a remarkably clear view of Buster's qualities as an actor pure and simple. It has always been a mystery to me why this part of Buster's collection of talents should be the least commented upon, but I'm sure that the readier availability of this movie will go some way to curing the omission. Some of the comedy moments do quite clearly show the master's hand; I had not expected to laugh much and as a result, being unprepared, I almost hurt myself. As a whole it is not as good as a Keaton movie, but it is far superior to most of the MGM sound 'comedies'. Also one could certainly wish to have seen Buster 'in love' with more actresses of this quality. The Kino print is basically very good indeed with a few minor bad moments. The score was pleasant, if occasionally a tad repetitive.

To comment generally on the quality of the Kino prints as concerns the above feature movies, the centering was very superior, heads hardly ever touched the top of the screen, and feet were almost always in, in other words these are the best prints I have yet seen of silent movies on video. Since the addition of soundtrack to films, most silent prints have been cropped on all four sides, favouring removal of the left hand side and the bottom, which is often

frustrating viewing. Even the kino prints do not include the extreme edges of the original frame but they go so much closer than any others I've seen that, taking into account that Buster favours long and medium shots, it never affects the viewers pleasure adversely, or even noticeably.

There were the odd individual frames missing, I would say an approximate average of 5-6 per feature which is also superior to any others I've seen.

The speed was also excellent, being only ever so slightly above speed of reality, hardly noticeable in fact. This factor alone would put Kino way ahead of the competition.

As to scratches etc. most features seem to start off a tad scratchy during the credits, and from then on play very smoothly, with the exception of some damage to Three Ages which is due to the fact that the originals were only just re-mastered in time; certainly the same damage was visible in the release print I saw in 1970. In other words, I rate the Kino release as 10 out of 10 for visuals, and 7-8 out of ten for sound with the exception of Sherlock Junior which I rate as 9 and a half out of 10. I only hope Kino make a fortune and don't have to be satisfied with just knowing they have performed a long awaited and absolutely vital public service.

The packaging is also a 10 out of 10 affair, and they even throw in a very pleasant little booklet to inform you about Buster. God be praised. I am going to presume that the three remaining features will be dealt with in just such an excellent fashion.

We now turn to the shorts. It is perfectly arguable that Buster should have started making features in 1920 and not 1923. Certainly I would argue for it, but this is hypothetical nonsense, on a par with arguing that he should have made any film he felt like making between 1928 and 1965. We must be grateful for what we have. And what we have is a collection of shorts full of inventiveness, wit, and a general feeling of fun for its own sake.

The High Sign is funny, though it suffers from a crude cameo appearance from Al St. John, mercifully brief. There is enough comedy to keep one interested, but one can also see why Buster shelved it. The print quality is only so so, and the soundtrack is quite acceptable. This print does not contain the later insertion of the second banana skin [mentioned in the text] which I have seen in another print.

One Week is just good clean fun from start to finish, full of astonishing bits of business. It is easy to see why pictures from this movie were included in the first Surrealist manifesto. The print is excellent, and the score acceptable.

The Scare Crow is crude but fun, very funny indeed at times but not as cohesive as could be wished. The print is good, but noticeably fast. The soundtrack is okay.

Neighbours is a hilarious little movie, slightly crazy in the best possible way, full of extraordinarily inventive comedy business. The print was good if a tad fast and the score was more than adequate. Not to be missed.

The Haunted House is also inventive and slightly crazy, but here there are moments of genuine horror even though we know it is fake. This really is quite disturbing, and very funny with it. All in all an indescribable little piece. The print was good, if a tiny bit fast. The soundtrack seemed to be scratched in some way here and there.

The Goat is very funny, lots of fun, but somehow seems a little forced in places. Even so it is genuinely enjoyable with some unforgettable moments. The print is good and the score is perfectly acceptable.

The Boat is a little gem. The whole idea is gorgeous, and there are unique touches of pure surrealist poetry. Buster is just so much fun playing the family man, a rarity as he is usually trying to get a wife, but here he is married with two delightful kids. The boat itself is a dream. In fact, if there is a criticism, it is that it is too damn short. This is one of the damaged ones, but taking that into account the print is fine. The organ soundtrack gets the thumbs down I'm afraid.

The Paleface is irresistible. Cute, charming, elegant, simple, and peculiar. Possibly not quite so uniquely Buster as The Boat, but as

near as is readily imaginable. Not to be missed. The print is good and the score is acceptable.

My Wife's Relations is also irresistible, but for totally different reasons. There is hardly a sympathetic character in sight, and the general impression is one of unrelieved awfulness. Wickedly funny and genuinely strange. Quite how he got this one past the censors escapes me. The print was okay if a tad jerky, and the score has a fairground quality interrupted by overloud bangs and other sound effects.

The Frozen North is in a state. As announced it is not complete. There is much to admire, much to laugh at, but the continuity does not make as much sense as one could wish. Even so, the sight of Buster acting like various screen heroes of the period is hilarious [especially as Stroheim at his most suavely lascivious]. The print is fast, messy, and the soundtrack is very scratched. The only short that the print could be described as low quality.

The Ballonatic is too charming for words. A movie of unique peculiarity. Even the bears are charming. Buster is at his most inept, and the heroine is possibly the most idiosyncratic of his career, uniquely loveable. The print was fine, and the score acceptable.

The Love Nest, like The Frozen North, is another protracted dream sequence. It contains some of the strangest comedy ideas you'll ever see. As a whole this is an irresistible black comedy. Without going on for pages this is also indescribable, you'll just have to watch it. The print was okay, but the soundtrack again suffered from loud interrupting effects to no great purpose.

As a whole, the quality of the prints of the shorts is lower than the features, which is a pity, but I understand we are lucky to have many of them at all. The general quality of soundtrack was also lower, but as the reviews above show, when you get two shorts of such quality thrown in with a feature of such quality, you'd be a pretty curmudgeonly person to resent it in any way. I don't think Kino could have improved their prints without spending big bucks, but I feel they could have played them a bit slower, so I give 8 out of 10 for picture, and some of the scores were frankly bad enough to drag the overall soundtrack score down to 5 out of 10, which is, I hasten to add, a good four points higher than any other soundtracks I have heard for these movies.

I have reviewed the above in shooting order [barring The Saphead], but the actual release orders are as follows:-

The Saphead with The High Sign and One Week. Three Ages with The Goat and My Wife's Relations. Sherlock Junior and Our Hospitality. These three available as a boxed set for \$79.95. The Navigator with The Boat and The Love Nest. Seven Chances with Neighbours and The Ballonatic. Go West with The Scarecrow and The Paleface. Battling Butler with The Frozen North and The Haunted House. These four available as a boxed set for \$109.95. The remainder are to be released as a boxed set at \$79.95 in June 1995 as follows:- The General with The Playhouse and Cops. College with The Blacksmith, The Electric House and Hard Luck. Steamboat Bill Jr. with Convict 13 and Daydreams. I shall include reviews as soon as maybe. Individually the videos are priced at \$29.95 each, so the boxed sets are a bargain. These movies are available in America on NTSC Video, and laser disc, but not, unfortunately on the system the rest of the world uses [PAL]. Write for your copy to Kino On Video, 333 West 39th Street, Suite 503, New York, NY 10018. Phone 1-800-562-3330. Fax 212-714-0871. Or order direct: 212-629-6880. Speaking as a comedy film fan, you'd be crazy not to buy the lot. I should like to take this opportunity to thank Kino's Kelly Hargraves for her kindness to me.

Of necessity I watched all the films above in one mammoth session and wrote the reviews straightway. After a couple of days I would like to say that the imagery repeats on me, just as it has for the 25 years since I first saw it all: Buster's beautifully underplayed drunk in 3 Ages, Go West for so many images to choose one would be silly, the ducks in Butler, the kitchen in the Navigator, the country club in 7 Chances, and so on. It all comes back in the mind, as do the totally different people he plays in each film, all portrayed in subtle shades. All my life I have loved the arts, primarily music, but I love to laugh. Buster makes movies that are at once funny, great art, and musical, and the music of it replays in the mind's eye like a

great melody. In my opinion, a life without Buster is a life that cannot imagine what great comic art can do.... Buy these videos, sit back and relax, preferably with your friends, play them; and if you don't laugh, it's time for you to book the undertaker. Above all ENJOY.



BUSTER KEATON, THE ABUSED CHILD WHO MADE A LIVING BY LETTING PEOPLE LAUGH AT HIS PAIN.

BUSTER KEATON, THE MASOCHIST.

Child abuse theory is a growth area in modern psychological writings, and while I welcome the uncovering of an age old crime that must be stamped out if we are ever to be able to call ourselves civilised, an unfortunate side effect is that it is becoming popular to view Buster in the above fashions, which I will say straight away that I cannot bring myself to believe. Tell me, what abused child would say of his abusive Father

"I don't think my Father had an ounce of cruelty in him." ? or

"Pop could not endure seeing another human being mistreated or unfairly dealt with. If you were being victimized your race didn't count. He was automatically on your side."

Half the reason for this particular attitude, and it has been a consistent one since 1899, is that both Buster and his Father are so damned skilled at being low comedy clowns. Back then, and indeed until quite recently, no-one had the opportunity to watch the stunts in slow motion. I have done this rigorously. Firstly there is the matter of acting, most people achieving falls and stunts do just that, achieve a fall or stunt, but Buster does it in character, his face and body are acting while the stunt happens. Secondly he is quite unbelievably fast in his reflexes. When watching frame by frame you get one, or two frames only to see how the stunt is done. What appears to be a sack of bones falling helplessly only reveals the secret control just before the moment of impact, when the hands hit the ground a split second before the backside, and then resume their apparently helpless behaviour. In real time it happens too fast to see, so the illusion is perfect; so perfect that even stuntmen are deceived, never having imagined acting of such quality during a stunt of such quality.

Various child abuse theorists posit that the unsmiling 'mask' is a typical abused child's response to life, and therefore Buster was an abused child. I maintain that the non-smiling is due to it being funnier that way, and represents no actual inner attitude to life, it is an intentional artifice, a dramatic mask. Further, much of this stone face stuff is rubbish. Buster has a wide ranging ability to express his (apparent) inner thoughts and feelings with his face, which is both mobile and flexible, he just does not allow himself to smile onscreen, so much so that photo's of Buster smiling (rare) hardly look like Buster Keaton at all. This is all part of his art, a facet of his skill. In his personal life, the smiling face is the face his friends remember. Buster knows that his audience must laugh at him, so he keeps the smile for his private life lest

"the audience suspect how much I was enjoying myself."

He plays men so bedevilled by fate that even their victories, such as getting the girl, must be comically undercut. In real life Buster was almost always a winner, and quite clearly saw himself in that way from his earliest childhood. He didn't cry because he was not hurt. I admit that his skills and talents in the low comedy department are so rare as to be unique in their high quality, gladly, but the down side is that it has convinced many who should study harder that he was injured and damaged all the time. He was only injured when things went wrong, and if you spend over 60 years doing what he did for a living it would be unrealistic to expect to get through the whole time without a single mistake, and mistakes cause damage;

"if you are a low comedy clown, that's what you expect".

If you drove a car in heavy traffic for 60 years would you expect never to scratch the paint? It is well attested that low comedy clowning is injurious to the health, the example of Grimaldi, crippled by early middle age, is but one of many. But to Buster, Grimaldi's level of personal injury would no doubt have been unacceptable, certainly he never suffered in anything like the same way. Grimaldi, and others, therefore, had a lesser ability to avoid damage than Buster. Buster's attitude to such damage, when it

happens, is also rare, and even I find it hard to credit. Maybe he had a 'low pain threshold'. Certainly he saw it as a part of the job for which he was well rewarded. Anyway, unlike most stuntmen, he never spent a day in hospital for injuries sustained at work, which shows a quite superhuman ability to avoid damage. When the damage comes he accepts it with what appears to be fatalism, a conviction that life is full of uppercuts whether you deserve them or not. No, as a squeamish person who has spent his entire life doing his best to avoid pain, I do not understand it, but then I don't understand Leonardo Da Vinci either, I only know he existed and behaved in certain ways. I can accept facts, and the fact is Buster lived his life this way and was contented with it. As Eleanor says,

"I'd have been on crutches if it had been me."

As to Joe Keaton being an abusive father, I do not believe it, but it is possible, - not probable, not likely, but just barely possible. Certainly he was a dangerous father to work with after he made the switch from beer to whiskey, but by then Buster was a young adult, and as stated was capable of giving as good as he got. Certainly Joe Keaton was a difficult and inflammable character, with a breadth of odd behaviour patterns quite beyond my ken, but he was fiercely proud and protective as a Father, and I quite frankly can't imagine him abusing his kids. This is not to say I know it is not so, I just don't believe it. If you study the art of the abused, Dickens for instance, there is commonly a terror of people displayed, a feeling of personal threat hanging over the scene. In Keaton's art the threat is very rarely people, and when it is they are very rarely terrifyingly villainous, but more often they are agents of larger forces, socially required behaviours etc. The real threats in Keaton's work are natural forces, oceans, floods, avalanches and so on. When people are threats, it is often because they are well-meaning and/or incompetent. We are least convinced by his characters on the few occasions when they are simply villainous (College), they do not ring entirely true; but in Dickens the villains are truly malevolent, and scary. Buster's attitude to people, succinctly, live and let live, is a constant feature in his movies, there is no us and them, people are people are people, unique, varied, and tolerated, and none particularly bad, and most behave 'badly' for entirely understandable reasons. This does not strike me as a tenable view for an abused child. Further, there is no evidence of family rift after adulthood sets in. Most abused children I have known as adults show extreme attitudes to their parents. Mothers are resented for being accessories and Fathers are shunned. Buster supported his entire family and socialised with them on a regular basis, living with them a lot of the time. Either Buster was not abused or he had a quite superhuman ability for forgiveness. Both views are tenable, but quite frankly the former seems more likely. Further, as he says, he was his parent's partner as well as their child, and unlike most children was fully empowered in that he was the family breadwinner from the age of four and a half. It was in his power to break up the act any time he felt like it, he just never felt like it until Joe's drinking got out of hand. For these and other reasons I emphatically reject the opinions of those who claim that he did his work by accepting that it hurt all the time, and I beg to differ with those who claim he was an abused child. On this latter issue, it is notable that Dardis is the only biographer to insist on such abuse, and as noted, he never met Buster, and he is in no way reliable in any other area.

Buster's attitude to violence in his films is also unique, both in terms of world cinema, and especially in terms of American cinema. In American cinema violence is nearly always unrealistically glorified, and most other countries' films have followed suit. A punch on the jaw is displayed as a perfectly reasonable response to many social situations. Buster never glorifies violence. In *The General*, where he renders his guards unconscious, it is quite clear that the 'blows' are representative and not real. In *Steamboat Bill Jr.* his hitting the Jailer is quite clearly not a real blow, it is a comedy 'hit' for all that the jailer pretends to be knocked out, and when Buster himself is hit on the head with a pistol (not seen) and taken unconscious to hospital, he is dumped head down in the back seat of a car and then blithely crosses his legs into a lounging position to

remind the audience that he is *not really* hurt. This sort of approach to portraying violence, comedy hits rather than dramatic hits, is a constant in the features, which is surprising in view of the fact that he otherwise insists on everything being "so authentic it hurts". The exception to this rule is *Battling Butler*, where the nature of a plot about boxing includes so much real violence and so much social encouragement to be violent, that a climactic fight is dramatically unavoidable, and as such is treated with the wholehearted seriousness that the subject requires. Though Buster is quite clearly aware that there is violence, mayhem, war, etc. in the real world, when he shows it in his films it is displayed dispassionately, as a thing which is *so*, not as a glorious, or even necessarily a horrific thing. In *The General*, the fact that people die in a war is shown devoid of any attitude except that this is so. In *Our Hospitality* the danger of guns is shown as it is in real life, many shots are fired, few hit target, and in this case none hit Buster, or anyone else, except in the prologue in which two people meet with gun in hand and murder and self defence in mind, and both die, ungloriously, and the grief of the victims families is also shown; a responsible attitude which one could wish more American movie directors would espouse. There are no winners by violence in his movies, most lose by it if they succeed in hitting target. Buster constantly reassures his audience that no-one is hurt, except where it is dramatically important for the threat of violence, which powers some of the plots (many fewer than in the case of most other directors) needs must come to fruition, as in *The General* and *Battling Butler*. In many cases the violence of the act rebounds upon the actor. In most comedy there is a very real violence, someone must be hurt in some way for most laughter to be provoked, dignity must be kicked in the butt, people must slip over banana skins, etc. In Buster's work, this very real violence is undercut as often as is humanly possible, and totally sidestepped as often as is imaginable, and certainly more often than any other performing comedian I have ever seen or heard of, and than any other comic artist I am aware of, with the honourable exception of comic artist/poet George Herriman. Where in Chaplin or the Marx Brothers all around them suffer, in Buster's work the violence happens to Buster and he is unharmed, in danger certainly, for without suspense there is no laugh, but when hit, not hurt. In all these ways, plus especially his insistence that all people are allowed to be themselves even when their motives are twisted, we have a tolerance of comic creation, a non-violence of comedy, unique in the film canon, and this tolerance, I submit, is impossible to the abused child.

Therefore I believe that Buster's childhood is exactly as he describes it, not perfect, but as near perfect as it would have been reasonable to expect. Further, I say that unless startling *new* evidence surfaces, this issue is a non starter. Q.E.D.



THE COMEDY THAT IS ART.

What is success? Robert Louis Stevenson reckons:-

"A man is a success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much, who has gained the respect of intelligent men and the love of children, who has filled his niche and accomplished his task, who leaves the Earth a better place than he found it whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem or a rescued soul, who never lacked appreciation of Earth's beauty or failed to express it, who always looked for the best in others and gave the best he had."

As far as it is possible to know anything about a biography subject, I know that Buster Keaton was a success at all points of Mr. Stevenson's definition. But even more than that, Buster Keaton's success as a creator of 'perfect poems' is not, as was thought at the time, the sort of impermanent success that many a moron has attained in the popular arts of this century. Buster Keaton is a success in terms of the history of all art on this planet, and that success, apart from being a benchmark of cinematic excellence, is not easily explicable in purely rational terms. Many writers who, I have no doubt, considered themselves more intelligent than I or Buster, have failed to put their finger on just what it is that Buster does to reality that makes it both real and dreamlike at the same moment. Certainly for me the films Buster made have the subtle eeriness of those dreams which seem real even after you awake. Many have tried to explain this by foisting upon Buster a world view that he quite frankly would have derided to scorn, had he been so impolite, and had he cared enough to unravel their terminology into plain speech. And plain speech is what this book is about. The book consists of the plain speech of a number of plain speakers, mainly Buster and his immediate family, with quotes from other relevant eyewitnesses. I make no claim for completeness of story telling, much is missed out that you can find in various other biographies, but I do claim that all of this book is as true as memories and honest people can make it. I do not claim this truth lightly. First I compiled every direct quote ascribed to Buster and put it in chronological order, removing the least detailed repetitions. Then I have checked the veracity of all questionable quotes with the one person who knew him most intimately, Eleanor Keaton, his wife of nigh thirty years. She is, as you will read for yourself, an almost shockingly honest person. If she doesn't know, she says so, and if it's a spade, she calls it a spade. At first she was slightly reluctant to debunk some of the favourite myths about Buster that have become common currency, but though she never exactly warmed to the task, she was scrupulous in her attempts to be exact. Some Buster Keaton fans may be shocked to have some of their favourite illusions shattered, to which all I can say is, tough. Further, I have checked any questionable statements wherever possible through impartial sources, earliest sources, and often, all sources.

In starting this book, one of my main intentions, and I think I can say I succeeded, was to fill the gap that all biographies so far have left when they skipped Buster's last thirty years of life. I can see that a thirty year trail of movies which he appeared in, but had almost no hand in creating would be boring to a biographer, but it is inexcusable in my view to ignore it. The story of Buster Keaton is the story of a lifetime of personal success, and that success did not stop just because no-one ever bank-rolled him to make his own movies in the latter part of his life. Further, as the works of art he created on film are unique, the man behind the art is of historical importance, even had he spent thirty years in jail. The attitude of previous biographers to his last thirty years has been, in my opinion, as biased and cruel as the family that take the sweet puppy home for Christmas, and then drown it as it grows up. Further, I don't believe they much cared about any truth but their own.

Film, the only truly new art form in centuries, was the first to maximise the monetary potential of the recording techniques that have revolutionised the arts of this century. Though music also took a leap into the present with recording, and though the music of the

twenties is still among the corner stones of the musical culture of this century (unfortunately unbeknownst to many modern musicians), it did not reach a level of financial return comparable to film for another thirty years. But film returned huge rewards almost instantly, starting a spiral of technical improvements that was, unfortunately, hardly ever matched by artistic improvement. The art of D.W. Griffith for instance, though interesting and often breathtaking, and doubtless seminal, can nowadays be viewed as dated and irrelevant, and often, especially dealing with gender, race, and other 'political' issues, unacceptable. Great art does not date. The buildings of Antoni Gaudi will be monuments to the complexity of the human spirit for as long as they stand or photographs exist. There is no yardstick to date them by, they are unique, and though they incorporate elements from almost all known architecture, no other building could be mistaken for a Gaudi. Now name another architect who has produced buildings that will always be appreciable as art. Most buildings are fashion driven, not art driven. Similarly, the films of the twenties were fashion driven, most people in the business saw it as a get-rich-quick scheme that needed taking for all it was worth as fast as possible. Such attitudes very rarely produce art, let alone great art, though examples to the contrary do, I'm sure, exist, even though I can't think of an example right now. Art, I am told, is hard to define. I define art in terms of the immortality of the human spirit. In other words, art is that which succeeds in instilling in an audience an understanding, insight, or just a glimpse of the true inner world of humanity, the absolute uniqueness of every human soul. The outer world is thoroughly covered by the entertainments; musicals, romantic fiction, war comics, action/splatter movies, pornography, insincere music, etc. all time passers with no inner content, no soul. And without soul it ain't art, it's drivel, or entertainment, as you please. [This is not to say that great art is necessarily unentertaining, Buster's movies are wildly entertaining, but they are driven by an inner worth greater than fashion or money.] Now I am aware that the foregoing is not going to be a popular definition, but to me, the definition has been a great help in preventing me getting swamped in pseudo art while I search for the real thing. Furthermore, art, to be art, must speak forever to the human race, it cannot be a fashion product alone. Some fashion products obviously are art, but most only display 'artistry' in transferring money from the pockets of a credulous public into the pockets of the fashion producer. Art may not speak to all, obviously at this moment nigh two thirds of the population of the planet could care less about art, they are too busy finding the next meal. But to the privileged third to which you and I belong, art is our highest expression of our place in the universe and in our own minds. Many clever people have already analysed Busters view of these last, with quite fantastically dissimilar results, which proves, if nothing else, that art is also, for an audience, a medium for personal interpretation, but I would maintain, only within terms of the above definition.

To move on to comedy, most comedy quite clearly is not art; most comedy depends on cruelty and pain; for instance, hilarious as it is, Groucho Marx's humour depends on the discomfort of those his mouth comes into contact with, about whom we do not care. This is a verbal form of violence, and violence is a direct denial of the unique worth of all human beings, it is totally inimical to any kind of human dignity (in its deepest sense, this being a necessary distinction as much comedy depends on the destruction of the empty show of dignity). Further, the laughter Groucho elicits is the easy laughter to be got by setting up Aunt Sally targets representing authority figures at their most pompous and ridiculous. I love it as much as the next Groucho fan, because for all of us it represents a release of the pressures we all inwardly feel that authority is forcing on us personally. But were you or I to behave as Groucho does it would be short trip to some form of social readjustment centre. But it is still, massively entertaining class act that it is, violent, in that his targets are revealed as worthless, or lacking in any unique spirit. I maintain that anything that extols violence, encourages violence, or glamourises violence cannot, under any circumstances, be deemed to be art. Art is, must be, part of the solution, not part of

the problem. Anything which glamourises or extols violence is not art, but propaganda in favour of violence, and as violence is in the highest degree inimical to the value of the unique individual human spirit, it is anti-human and therefore anti-art. In Groucho's case, he impresses the uniqueness of his own spirit to the detriment of everyone else's. It is clever, wildly amusing, entertaining, artful, but not, I am afraid, art. I can only find two examples of art with soul in the comedy of this century, with any large body of work to study, and these are Buster Keaton's films and George Herriman's Krazy Kat komik. Both of these use the elements of violence inherent in all comedy in a totally original manner. Krazy Kat is hit on the head with a brick by a mouse who despises him/her in almost every page. But Krazy Kat is not a cat, he/she is a sprite, and when she is hit with a brick she deems it a sign of love and affection, when the brick fails to hit she is heartbreakingly heartbroken. Obviously this is not all that makes Herriman's work great art, it takes marvellous graphics, brilliantly poetic verbal expression and total uniqueness of finished product, among other virtues. Keaton also has a method of bypassing the violence inherent in comedy, all the violence happens to him. Further the violence of the rest of the human race is depicted dispassionately, as in *The General*, as a thing that really happens, not as a glamorous event. The Charlie Chaplin kick-authority-figures-in-the-arse school of comedy is no doubt funny to those that like that kind of thing, but I maintain that it cannot be art. Add to that, in Chaplin's case, a hideously insincere nineteenth century sentimentality and for my taste the result is truly nauseating. Keaton manages to avoid such sentimentality at every point where in other's films it would rear its saccharin head. Indeed his lack of sentimentality is noticeable in contrast to all but a few film-makers. Obviously there is a considerable amount more to it than that, but that is the start. With normal comic violence I maintain Keaton's comedy could not be art, but add to the lack of it all his other cinematic virtues and I maintain it is impossible to define Keaton as just entertainment, no matter how good. Of course this is no doubt a matter of taste, but I know what I like, I like great art, and I love comedy. When the two are combined it is, to me, unbeatable.

Buster was unique, even in his period, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, he had a training in, as he calls it, low comedy, that started earlier than anyone else.

Secondly he was spared the doubtful advantages of an education, in the accepted sense. This left him free to deal with reality purely on his own terms. While not wishing to denigrate the undoubted advantages of education for the mass of humanity, it is hard to find a great artist who was happy or even successful in the educational system. Buster was spared all this, along with a large number of erroneous, but socially accepted, 'facts' of the period. This, I believe, is a large part of the reason for the uncluttered aspects of Buster's film world, it is the reality of a person who lives in the real world, and has no complex explanations for what that is, It just is because that's the way it is, not because of the way he believes it might or ought to be.

Thirdly, and I believe most importantly, he showed a precocious aptitude for his profession such as may be found in the likes of Mozart and Descartes. In other words he had talent. That talent was almost instantly recognised at the place where it counts, the box office.

Fourthly, and least explicably, is the matter of taste. For instance, where his contemporaries treated period drama as romantic and essentially purely fictitious, (and contemporary comedians ignored period comedy entirely) Buster insisted on veracity. His attention to detail is, to say the least, thorough, but he never allows this desire to be perfect to get into the acting performances, in which he wants, and gets, spontaneity. This combination is rare, and I believe, unbeatable. Further, his taste would not allow overacting in an era of massive overacting.

Fifthly, his insistence on reality in his stunts is unique, no-one else has done it, and I suggest that no-one else in the future history of movies will do it. All stunt sequences in any films but Buster's are a collection of short bits of film trying to convince

the audience that a thing that has not in fact happened has happened. In Buster's movies stunts are done in long takes and you can actually see everything happen, with Buster actually acting visibly in the middle of it all. Here we have a unique marriage of taste and skill and talent.

Sixthly his attitude to villains, heavies, or baddies has to be about the only semi-realistic one in hollywood history. In most films the baddie is so stereotyped that one can safely predict that anyone shown with bad eating habits or bad manners is going to be 'rubbed out' within the next five minutes, no doubt to an audience's great relief. Buster's villains are never portrayed in such a one dimensional manner, they are people, both good and bad. Equally his heroes are by no means perfect. Johnnie Gray in *The General* is quite a bad tempered character, many are close to dim, and all seriously fallible. His heroines are by no means the cliché fashion plate that is usually acceptable, they are real women, often not over endowed with intelligence, usually a hindrance, but always charming after their fashion. In other words, his people are people, and not cardboard cut-outs. This is rare enough in literature, but even rarer on film.

It may be that the combination of the above virtues, if applied by another person to the making of films would produce films equally as great, but frankly I doubt it. Buster also had an eye for landscape, framing, detail, timing, he had a clear idea of what is actually funny, and moreover, a solid grounding in how to make funny incidents power a plot, or at least in no way hinder same. He invented wildly imaginative props and scenarios, and was able to apply all his talents and skills to the making of a finished product, while hardly ever making do with anything less than the best. His freedom of action in film was rare, but he earned that freedom by being both good and reliable. He had everything Tati had, most of what Kurosawa has, all that Lloyd had, much that Eisenstein had, and everything Orson Welles imagined he had with a lot left over, incomparable grit and determination, and he was beautiful to boot. In a more perfect world doubtless there would be more than one Buster Keaton, but in my view it would be unrealistic to be unsatisfied with one.

That deals with Buster the film maker. Buster the comedian is a whole other problem. Agee says: 'Perhaps because 'dry' comedy is so much more rare and odd than 'dry' wit, there are many who never cared much for Keaton. Those who do cannot care mildly.....' Certainly Buster tends never to oversell jokes, which may well leave a number of people behind. It is notable that his popularity in the U.S. was much smaller than many broader comedians, but then his popularity in the rest of the world made up for it. Certainly there is a case to be made, and I am surprised no-one appears to have made it, that Buster was a supreme film ironist in the tradition of the great American ironists, Mark Twain, James Branch Cabell, etc. Taken in the broadest possible terms, Buster's films can be viewed as deeply ironic about human life itself. In *College*, almost as if to say, sorry about the obviousness of the foregoing, the simple fact that marriage is not necessarily happy is displayed as a brief two shots followed by death. The irony of death is everywhere apparent. It was common habit, both in film, theater, literature etc. to display marriage as the happy ever after, it was good enough for many famous writers, but not for Buster. In *The General* Buster fights to become a soldier, and wins; but he has won a place on the losing side, and we know, should we care to think about it, that he will undergo terrible privations and very likely die in the two years following the end of the movie. Often the heroine is a prize that mature reflection would show to be unworthy of all the effort of the winning. In *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* Buster is shown fighting to save his Father's boat and business, but at best all he can have won is a brief reprieve. And so on. The pointlessness of many of Buster's heroic endeavours, if meditated upon, is clearly apparent after the laughter is over. This is ironic. Whether it is intentional is another matter, but the regularity of its appearance is highly suggestive. Personal experience tells me that sarcasm and irony are not well appreciated in America, and this may be the reason that so many fewer Americans than Europeans seem to have rated Buster as sublime comedy. The comedy is based on life and the outcome is known, but this can hardly appeal to a nation

slavishly believing in 'The pursuit of happiness'. Buster in his films pursues happiness with a doggedness and determination above the norm, but the irony is, he attains the pursued. In other words, happiness cannot be pursued, only experienced. Of course, Buster could simply be being as realistic as he knows how, and the irony could be unintentional. The strangeness of many of his jokes is another thing. Moews has gone to great lengths on this subject and has uncovered a pattern, mainly the threefold repeat of action where much labour is expended and at the end, nothing has changed. This is ironic about the pointlessness of effort, or possibly it is just funny to Buster. I think it is probably that simple, Buster felt these things were funny, and regardless of whose idea it was, it didn't get into the film unless he thought so. Therefore his films are a collection of what he thought amusing or risible. Very probably he was entirely unconscious of the darker depths of his wit.

Finally, there is Buster Keaton the film star. It is my observation that male film stars have one thing required above all to be constantly watchable, and that is, that when you look into their eyes, you believe them implicitly. Humphrey Bogart, Clint Eastwood, Lee Marvin, to name the first three that come to mind, when they hold a gun and I look into their eyes, I believe they would shoot, and not give a hoot afterwards. Now I know all three are probably lovely people, but on screen, when they act threatening, I believe. Clark Gable also has a quality similar, and I'm sure everyone can provide their own names. Buster does amazing things with his eyes, he can project such feelings as disbelief, terror, sarcasm, love disappointment, spiritual agony, hunger, and so on, without so much as moving a facial muscle, the eyes say it all. I don't suppose it is unique, but I can't bring to mind a single other performer with such a wide ranging expressiveness in the eyes, and hardly ever a close-up. As Bruckman says, he can tell his story by raising an eyebrow, he can tell his story by not raising an eyebrow.

For all the above reasons this book had to be written.

This book was refused by many publishers, I suspected they viewed this as a film book, and film book publishers seem to think it is not enough about film. This is because Buster did much work in film, but had a life, and work, outside film.

Just as Leonardo Da Vinci is not just an anatomist, so Buster Keaton is not just a film maker. Indeed his list of talents is unique in film history. He was the supreme stunt man of stage and film, a semi-acrobat, a fine actor, film writer, film director, special effects designer and builder, a fine dancer, adequate singer and excellent bass ukelele player, and a bona fide film star. He was one of the greatest of silent film comedians, I believe the greatest, and certainly one of the finest and most distinctive clowns of all time. Many of these are not generally considered a true part of the arts, but when an artist of his stature brings an array of talents like the foregoing to his medium, and when that array of talents is sublimated to the specific production of laughter, what can the result be called if not great art, for all that there has not yet been an artist with a completely comparable array of talents?

I personally believe Buster Keaton is the single most important artist of the twentieth century, certainly in the performing arts, simply because he is uncopiable, and almost certainly never will be copiable. Learned critics are still writing learned dissertations on what the comedy of Keaton says about the human condition more than sixty years after his last great work was made, and I confidently predict that this is a situation that will continue for a long time yet. I would maintain that a large part of the reason his work can be taken so seriously is that Buster is so uninfected with intellectual methods (which change with fashion) that would date his art. Further, there is no other place you could see anyone else do those things. His work is unique and likely to remain so. As such, I believed it was well past time that a record of his life, a totally truthful record, was made for posterity, and lack of publication will not change that belief or stop me making sure that this record is kept. I am well pleased with the result in the main, and I feel it leads to some very important conclusions.

Conclusion One: Education does not produce talent, though it may nurture it. Talent is innate, and only skill can be added to that

talent with education, and the talent will doubtless choose the skills. In other words, education should set itself the task of discovering the individual's talents, and helping said individual to bring them to fruition for the general good.

Conclusion Two: Great artists do not have to be assholes in their personal lives, and are quite capable of behaving as if everyone else had an equal right to exist. This is contrary to popular wisdom.

Buster was a living disproof of these widely held beliefs, I.E. that artists can be made in schools, and that all great artists are bastards. Further, he is proof that great personal dignity is not necessarily accompanied by a lack of a sense of humour. He also has proved that comedy can be art, and that art does not have to take itself, or be taken, seriously. All these, and other lessons too, may be learnt in the pages of this book, and as such, I am proud to have put these pages together, though humbled by the responsibility. I do not expect that these lessons will be taken to heart by many of the run-of-the-mill egotistical semi-talented jerks that infest the world of the arts, but if the lessons get through to a few, we will have a better world, and here's hoping.

Well, I hope you didn't mind me getting all that off my chest. Buster himself would never have credited any of this talk about art. This book essentially consists of Buster telling his life story with his wife's interjections. This is absolutely necessary as Buster was 'extremely reticent about a large number of things, especially where he had to mention people who had not yet died at the time of interview. Further, his inability to understand what all the fuss was about leads him to undercut himself. However, that said, he is remarkably honest, so much so that almost all spurious quotes, [claiming to be Buster] were easy to spot. The result is a journey through the American entertainment industry almost unrivalled in its length, and its depth of knowledge. In the process he and Eleanor reveal as much as can be known about who Buster Keaton, the man, was. To be perfectly frank, this book would have been impossible for me to do if I had not found Buster thoroughly likeable. Further, I would have given up at the first sign of lying on the part of Buster or Eleanor. I am happy to say that this proved a baseless fear. I doubt that I shall ever do another biography of an entertainment figure, because it seems that nearly every time I read about one of my artistic heroes, they turn out to be disappointments of one sort or another. In Buster, as in George Herriman, we have a human being that I can only describe as a nice person.

To a modern art audience, the idea that a great artist can be both sane and a nice person is almost anathema. The idea that craziness and unpleasant personal habits is a necessary norm of great artists seems to be taught in schools. Buster is not like that. He is, for the scandal seeker, boringly heterosexual and monogamous. He was a man, not flawless, but honourable, gentle, kind, shy, self-effacing, supportive, reliable, courageous, loyal, generous, honest, and essentially simple and at home with the real world. He was, in my opinion, as a person, an admirable role model, for men, and especially for artists. Very few artists of any calibre or ilk have ever been prepared, as Buster was, to put their very life on the line for their art, and in Buster's case that art was simply driven by the desire to make us laugh. Can you imagine another artist prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for such a reward? Buster was nearer to death on many a days work than most drunks on the fast lane of a motorway; he would have died to make us laugh, and nearly did. If that ain't unique I don't know what is. And if that were all it would be amazing enough, but the result is poetry in motion, timeless, tasteful, and great art.

Happy reading.

ADDENDA.

The illustrations in this edition are in the order of *Objet trouve*.

There are no french accents in this edition.

Due to computer problems beyond my control, this edition has no index for which we apologise, and the correct index will be forwarded as a separate unit as soon as possible.

ABOUT THE EDITOR:

Oliver Lindsey Scott (44)

'Olly' (songwriter and constructive artist,) is from a family of farmers, illustrators (inc. C.E. & H.M. Brock), and mathematicians, and has a lifelong love of the finest in humour and the arts.

For a quarter of a century he has described himself as 'The World's biggest Buster Keaton fan', but when he searched for the definitive book on his favourite artist, he found Buster's voice swamped in the opinions of others; so with rural tenacity and mathematical precision he enlisted the corroborative aid of Eleanor Keaton and set about rectifying the situation. After 5 years, and thousands of dollars, this is the book he went looking for all those years ago, which he feels sure will be the essential book on the subject for as many years to come.

Now we can all get some sleep.

Buy him a drink, he's earned it!

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